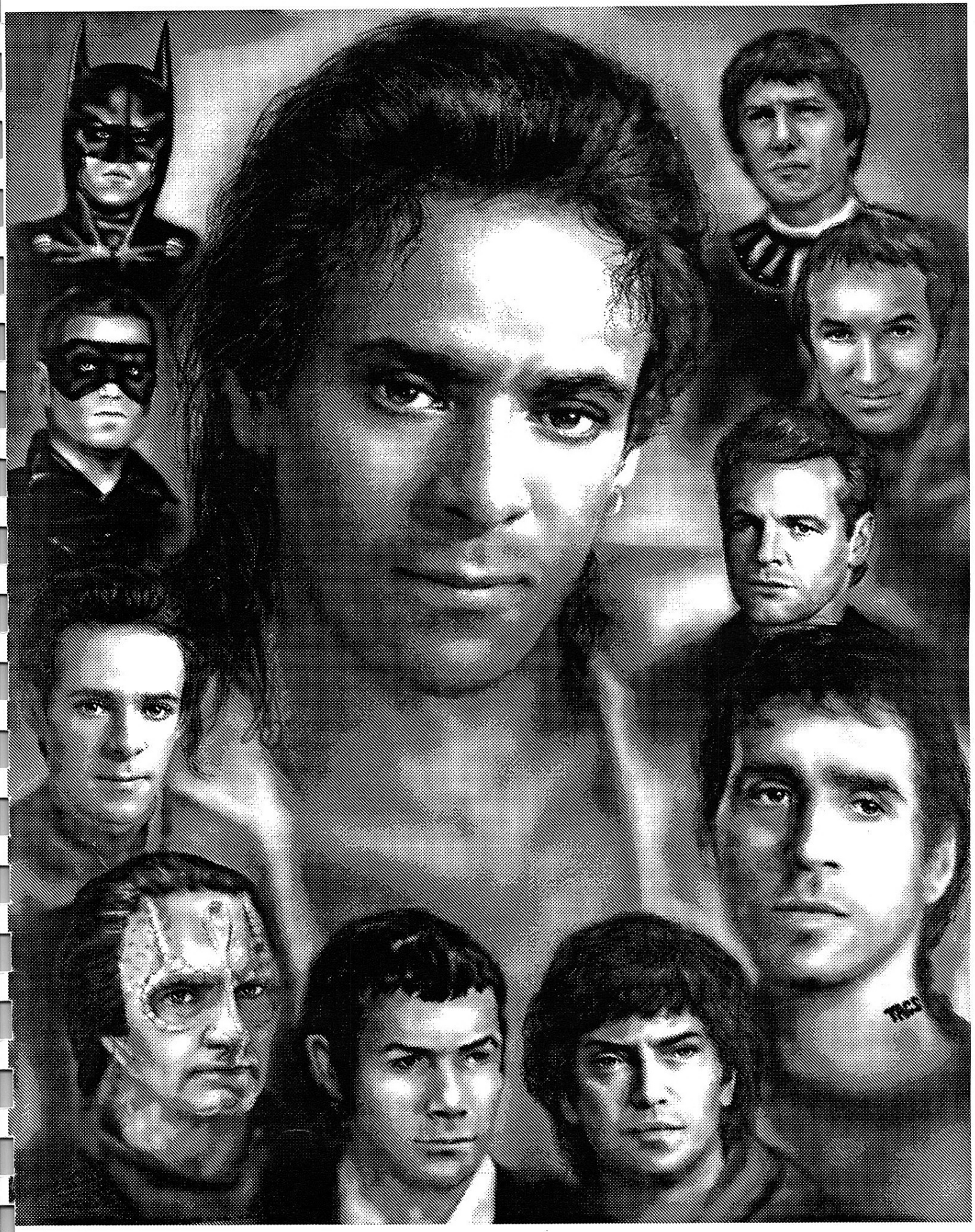

# COMPOUNDED INTEREST

# 4.5

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# FOR LOVE'S SAKE

## by Atira Kei

**Take this man who comes to you**
**Take me to your side**
**I throw away my soulless days**
**I need you in my life**

**In the doorway of my heart**
**The presence of you shines**
**So put your face to my window**
**Trust what you see inside...**

**--- "I Was Made for You"**

"What happened?"

"Julian's been attacked again. Altovar managed to reach him."

Listening to the words, Garak stood near the doorway of the Infirmary, hoping not to be noticed in the midst of chaos. Before him, Bajoran and human med-techs hovered around the examination table where the doctor lay, taking readings. Worry and fear was etched onto each face. Beside Bashir's head, Dax's eyes were fastened on the scanners surrounding the doctor. To one side, Commander Sisko stood uncomfortably.

"Attacked!" Sisko repeated angrily. "How could he be attacked? Altovar's in Odo's brig!"

The Trill took a hypo from an assistant and injected it into Bashir.

"There must have been some part of the Lethean left in Julian's mind that linked him to Altovar. When Altovar regained his strength, he simply reached across the link to attack."

"What can we do?" Sisko's tone was one of an angry man who knew he was helpless.

"I've been in contact with the Lethean homeworld. One of their Master Healers is already on her way. She should be here in about 10 hours." Dax's hand gently grazed over Bashir's forehead. "All we can do in the meantime is keep him as stable as possible."

"Lieutenant, the doctor's vitals are continuing to fall," a Med-Tech announced anxiously.

"20cc's Cortrazine!" was ordered and a med tech pulled a synaptic stimulator from the medical tray.

Garak closed his eyes and turned away, unwilling to hear any more of the exchange. Slowly, he left the Infirmary, ignoring stares he encountered from security as he passed. Moments ago he'd been running, the doctor a dead weight in his arms. He imaged it was quite a sight to the good citizens of Deep Space Nine.

**********

"How is the doctor?"

*Quark.*

Garak looked down, surprised to find the Ferengi standing in his path, just outside the Promenade. Noting the concerned expression, Garak sighed. "He's dying."

Quark absorbed this.

"I'm not surprised, you know. Not that I want Bashir to die, of course," he added defensively. "He's not like most humans. In fact, I didn't think I'd see him in my bar again after the first time."

Garak glared at the Ferengi. "You knew about Letheans, yet you introduced him to Bashir?"

Quark took a step back.

"Look, Altovar wanted to trade. Letheans, especially banished ones like him, can be dangerous. But I didn't think he'd attack the doctor, a Star Fleet officer."

"You didn't think, Quark. You just wanted to protect your own hide." Suddenly he wanted to take his anger out on the little Ferengi, then decided against it. It wouldn't make any difference. Instead, he started to walk away to go to his own quarters, to mourn the loss of his friend, of...something he never had the chance to know.

"Garak, come on back to the bar," Quark called. "I want to talk to you."

"Talk about what?" the Cardassian challenged through gritted teeth.

*Why am I even bothering to ask...*

"I want to help you," Quark replied quietly. Garak turned to find the Ferengi studying him closely. "And, maybe help Bashir?"

There was something in the Ferengi's tone and posture that struck Garak odd.

*He knows something.*

"What is the cost?" he demanded.

Quark looked around nervously, weaving his hands together in obvious apprehension. "Nothing," he whispered, as if cursing in polite company. "I'll even throw in a glass of Kanaar."

Garak studied Quark in wonder. "Why?"

Shifting uncomfortably, the Ferengi continued to glance from side to side, as if afraid of being overheard.

"Because I like the human. Because I like you." He swallowed. "And because his relationship with you gives me hope for the rest of us."

"His relationship..." Garak started to deny, then gave up. There was no relationship between himself and the human, nothing beyond good friendship. The doctor never gave any indication and the Cardassian never wanted to endanger the human. But if Quark wanted to provide information because he assumed more then... "I'll come back to the bar."

**********

The bar was crowded, but the Ferengi drew Garak to the far side and poured him the promised drink.

"Once I saw a Vulcan attacked by a Lethean when I was visiting Starbase 16 on business ten years ago," Quark began without prompting. "She survived, like Bashir. But a few days later, she was dead. Letheans don't like to lose. Before a one of their healers could come, he reached out and took her mind."

"What is your point, Quark?" Garak asked impatiently. "I already know what happened to Doctor Bashir."

"Ah," Quark raised a hand. "But you need to know what I heard the Lethean healer say when she arrived. She told the Chief Medical Officer there that if they'd killed the Lethean who'd attacked her, it would have broken the link and might have save her."

*Oh, killing him... Something I'd planned to take care of before the creature left this station, anyway.* Garak thought.

"Altovar is being held under Federation law, Quark. They won't kill him without a trial, even to save the doctor."

*Weak laws! Weak punishments! How do they survive!*

Quark held Garak's gaze. "Not everyone here is part of the Federation."

There was a glimmer in the barkeep's eyes Garak had rarely seen in a Ferengi and, in particular, Quark...a very non-violent being. Bad for business. But at this moment, there was an understanding in them, even an anger.

*Because of Julian?* Garak glanced down at his now empty glass.

"No, Quark," he said as he looked into Quark's eyes. "Not everyone is a part of the Federation." He pushed his glass forward and stood. "Thank you for an enlightening conversation. But I believe I have a shop to run. If you'll excuse me."

Quark nodded, his expression at once falling back into its more familiar lines. "Of course," he replied casually, then moved down the bar to serve a number of new arrivals.

Garak walked out of Quark's bar into the Promenade. As he passed the Replimat, his eyes automatically rested on the table he and the doctor had just shared. Three humans and a Bajoran sat there now, rushing through their meals. A scant twenty minutes ago, he and Bashir were just ending their meal. He had teased the human, feigning offense at being cast as a villain in Bashir's mind during the Lethean's first attack. Julian's response was delightfully defensive.

Moved, Garak used the moment as an excuse to touch the human, to assure himself of the young man's life beneath his fingertips. Bashir seemed startled, but smiled, his light brown eyes taking on a light that drew in the Cardassian so completely.

Then the moment was gone. The doctor's eyes widened, his skin grew gray, then throwing up, he gripped his head and collapsed without a word. Garak remembered the weight of the human in his arms against his chest as he carried Julian to the Infirmary, handing him to medical personnel who barely acknowledged his existence.

*I wish I were free to take full revenge, Lethean. It is not enough to end your existence, I would make you suffer. However, my options are few and your life will have to do.*

**********

The station was quiet. It was, by standard Federation cycles, the middle of the night - the one hour between "day" and "night" when even Quark's bar was closed and dark. He walked slowly, carefully. It was nearly eight hours since the doctor's attack. Bashir was stable, barely.

The Cardassian used that time to calm himself, to plan carefully. Some inner voice told him that the Lethean's death would not disturb even the Commander, but, he had to be careful to leave no trail...

The doors to the security office parted easily. Garak entered, his eyes scanning the small control area, orienting himself to the different consoles. It seemed empty, but, the tailor knew better. The young officer in charge during the hours Constable Odo regenerated, had gone for only a moment, distracted by her own biological needs to relieve herself. She was, he observed, a capable security guard. He would have to be careful not to harm her.

The set of doors to his left slid open. Instinct borne of decades of training took over and he fit himself into a shadow as the guard came back and passed him. He quietly moved up behind her.

A grunt escaped the human as he gripped her and pressed a stolen hypo to her neck...then it was over. With care, he pulled her around the console to lay her on the floor. He'd given her a mild sedative with few side effects. In fifteen to twenty minutes she would recover, but, by then he would be finished with what he had to do.

With purpose, his fingers flew across the computer consoles, rearranging monitors, disengaging any sensors, doing what ever necessary to keep his identity undiscovered. He then opened the security screens that separated him from his prize.

There were three cells within Odo's brig. Fortunately, two were unoccupied. And the third....

"What do you want?" The Lethean's voice was deep with a hint of fatigue. The creature sat on the bunk behind the force field separating him from freedom. His hawkish face lifted, his red eyes took in the identity of his visitor. "What do you want, Cardassian?"

"Want?" the Cardassian replied as he watched his prey, ignoring the faint tremors that filtered through his mind, the Lethean's intrusion into his thoughts. "I want a lot of things, Altovar." His fingers moved over the lock pad. A second later, the force field was gone. "There," the Cardassian concluded. "Care to take a walk?"

The Lethean stared at him, his face showing no emotion.

"You're Garak. Garak, the tailor."

The former Gul smiled, his face open and friendly. "Yes. Garak the tailor. Did you guess, or is the fact that I am the only Cardassian on this station give me away?"

"What are you doing here?" Altovar stood. "Is this... about Dr. Bashir?"

Garak's eye ridges rose sharply. "The doctor? Now what would I have to do with a Star Fleet officer?"

The Lethean was silent for a moment. The tremors in Garak's mind grew stronger. In response, a natural shielding all Cardassians had against telepathic intrusion snapped into place. Yet the tremors continued. Altovar laughed.

"You Cardassians lost the edge when you chose not to develop your minds, but instead decided to cower behind useless barriers. You may be able to hide yourselves from primitive Vulcans, but you cannot hide from me!" He cocked his head. "You and the doctor are mates," he declared in a deep voice. "It makes sense now."

Anger and some little fear filled Garak, but he kept his manner calm, his weapon steady. "Sense? The doctor is a friend, no more."

Altovar laughed again.

"And I thought Dax was his match," he said as if giving the answer to an unspoken question. "I had sensed an attraction between you and the human, but I dismissed it and cast you as the deceiver in the doctor's mind. No wonder it failed. Such an unlikely bond." He sat down again. "It makes no difference now. It's too late to save him, Cardassian. I have finished what I started."

Garak didn't remember firing his weapon, only the brief glow, the brief smell of burnt flesh. Then there was nothing except the hint of dust on the bunk where Altovar had been sitting.

Gathering his wits, Garak cursed himself. He hadn't meant to kill him here, where physical matter could be detected. He'd thought to do this where the Lethean's remains would take years to detect.

Quietly, the tailor activated the force field on the brig, then left Odo's security office.

**********

"Mr. Garak, I was wondering if I could have a few words with you."

*Odo.*

Garak examined the fabric he was working with, carefully measuring for the best cut. It was Vulcan silk, extremely fragile. He was to make a wedding dress from it for a young Bajoran couple on the station.

*I had forgotten how difficult it was to work with. I should have charged them double for this.*

"Garak?"

Sometimes the shapeshifter's voice was a great source of irritation. This morning was no exception. Garak sighed.

*You are Garak the tailor, nothing more. Act your part...and spin your lies.*

"Constable Odo, a pleasure to have you in my shop!" He continued to concentrate on his work, unwilling to focus his attention on something he had no interest in discussing. "Anything I can do for you?"

"There was an incident in my security office early this morning." Odo's voice was nearer. "A prisoner was found dead."

Garak glanced up, surprised etched on his face. "Dead! In your jail? I didn't think it was possible!" He turned back to his work. "Who was it?"

"The Lethean who attacked Doctor Bashir three days ago, Altovar," Odo replied with an even tone.

"Altovar? Yes, I remember him. He approached the young doctor about getting some illegal substance. Of course, Dr. Bashir is a man of honor. He refused to provide what the Lethean wanted, so he was attacked." Garak felt his muscles tense as he remembered the moment, all the moments.

*I should have killed him the moment I laid eyes on him.*

"We reviewed all sensors records. Seems there is nothing recorded during the time the crime was committed." Odo's tone was smooth. "Takes special knowledge of this station's security, not to mention an extremely good understanding of Cardassian technology to do this."

Garak smiled innocently as he faced the shape shifter. "Do you suspect Chief O'Brien then? He has a talent with computers and technology."

"No." Odo leaned closer, nearly invading the Cardassian's private space. "Because I know there is someone here with even better knowledge... and better motivation."

*He knows... but then, I knew he would. Deny until your death, Elim!*

Garak laughed.

"Do you suspect *me*...of killing the Lethean? Why?"

"Because he attacked Dr. Bashir." With hands behind his back, Odo moved around the Cardassian. "I don't like my prisoners killed when they're in my custody. He was to be returned to the Lethean homeworld for trial and execution."

Garak drew himself up in righteous indignation.

"Really, Constable. I don't know what you're trying to imply. Why would I have any reason to break into your security area? To kill someone I'd briefly met one time? Dr. Bashir is excellent company for our lunches, but that's hardly a reason for me to kill one of your prisoners."

Odo paused in mid-step, his dark eyes studying the Cardassian.

"Don't try your lies on me as you would the others, Garak. I know there is a strong relationship between you and the doctor. I have seen it develop over the past few years. It would be natural to seek revenge for the brutal attack of one's lover."

The tailor burst out laughing, though his nerves froze in shock.

"My dear Constable! What kind of fool do you think I am! The doctor is human and nearly half my age! I find him entertaining, even enlightening from time to time. But there is nothing further between us! Even by Cardassian law, he is not a military man, he is a physician. Relations with one's own sex beyond puberty is considered... traitorous unless you are in the military." Garak shrugged, hoping to end what was becoming an uncomfortable conversation. "Was there anything else?"

Odo was motionless, his face completely blank.

"Dr. Bashir and I do not always agree on many issues and I think he is too unsettled for my comfort. But I respect him a great deal, especially his talents as a healer. Altovar's death has not disturbed me nearly as much as the breach in security."

"How is the doctor?" *Still alive, I know.* Garak assured himself. *I would know his death.*

"You haven't seen him?" Odo seemed genuinely surprised, then sighed. "A Lethean healer arrived two hours ago. The Infirmary can't do anything for him, so the doctor is in his own quarters. He should have died last night, but at the time Altovar died, he seem to improve slightly. But he's still in a coma." The shapeshifter paused, then added, "The healer seems to think there is only one treatment left to save him. But I'm not sure it is going to work."

Though his heart began to race and his mind shriek with denial, Garak managed to maintain an unhurried facade.

*Was I too late? Julian...*

"Is he going to die? That would be a shame," the Cardassian said casually. "I don't believe any replacement Star Fleet sends is going to be quite as talented."

"For once I agree with you." Odo turned to leave. "I don't have enough evidence to hold you, Garak. Altovar was the worst kind of criminal among his people and the Lethean government considers the matter of his death closed." He threw on last look over his shoulder. "You should go see Dr. Bashir... before you lose the opportunity."

Garak said nothing as the shapeshifter left his shop. Then he glanced down and sighed impatiently. Without realizing it, he had been crushing and twisting the fragile silk between his hands, ruining the material.

*I will have to charge them double afterall... for reordering purposes.*

Minutes later, the Cardassian closed his shop then headed for the doctor's quarters.

*If I am to lose him, I will see him off and make my peace.*

**********

No special code was needed to open the doors and no guard greeted him as he stepped into the doctor's quarters. Recently, the Cardassian had visited Julian here, admiring the eclectic style of the decorations and furniture. But much of that was gone, replaced by medical scanners which stood dormant to one side. In the center, a wider than standard Infirmary bed had been set up. There Julian Bashir lay, his obviously nude body covered by a thermal sheet. A med-tech stood next to the bed, monitoring the unconscious man's vital signs with a hand held tricorder.

*Minimal monitoring*, the Cardassian thought. *Is he that close to death?* With a cautious glance to the med-tech, he edged closer.

In his fantasies, the tailor had seen this. Bashir's beautiful, lean, smooth body laying in wait for him. But just as quickly, his daydream was over. Garak studied his young friend, unfamiliar emotions rushing to break his control.

*Not a scratch. Not a bruise. Not a broken bone. Nothing to show the torture I know you are suffering, the torment I feel in my bones every second I'm near you! What can I do, Julian? What can I do that will stop this?*

"Do you have permission to be here?"

The med-tech's firm voice broke his contemplation. The Cardassian studied the woman a moment, framing a variety of answers, then decided on something close to the truth.

"I've come to visit. Dr. Bashir and I share lunch. I was there when he became ill and I wanted to look in on him."

The young Bajoran looked him over as if seeing something beyond his words.

"You can have a few minutes," she told him, her tone softer. "Then I'll have to ask you to leave."

Garak accepted this with a nod.

*That is all I will need to see my friend to the next world, my dear.*

The tailor returned his attention to the doctor. Without thinking, he leaned forward, feeling an overwhelming urge to do... something.

*I have read one or two of your 'fairy tales', Doctor. I read one about a princess doomed to sleep forever, unless kissed by a prince to awaken her. I wish it were as simple for me to do for you...*

"Mr. Garak!"

Sisko's commanding voice brought Garak up sharp. In an instant he stood away from the bed, his posture guarded. At the foot of Julian's bed, the Commander stood next to Judzia Dax, who was out of uniform. In fact, he noted, she was attired in a conservative, but comfortable gown that framed the spots that ran down her body.

As he took this in, his eyes were further drawn to the third new presence in Julian's quarters. It was the Lethean healer, a female judging by her height (taller than her male counterparts) and narrow frame. She wore a long gown of deep scarlet, adorned with shimmering rocks he assumed was a part of her office. Her red eyes instantly fastened on him. Garak gasped as a light vibration rippled through his mind. His defenses arose, even as the probe grew more intense.

"Commander Sisko," the tailor greeted, forcing himself to remain calm, knowing there was nothing to be done about the telepath's invasion. He would not be staying long. "Lieutenant Dax," he continued, nodding towards the trill who gave him an odd smile.

"May I ask what you're doing here?" Sisko asked politely, though his tone was anything but pleasant.

"No special reason, Commander," Garak answered, responding to the authority in Sisko's voice. "Julian became ill and I wanted to look in on him." He spread his hands, expanding his lie. "I had no idea how grave things had become."

"You fear he is going to die, Cardassian," the Lethean healer said, her voice strong and deep. She moved between Sisko and Garak, her attention on the tailor. "And that might happen. His mind has almost completely withdrawn from us, though his body has yet to follow. But you could help him."

Garak glared at the alien woman.

*Help! You play with me! Julian is far away, so far I can only feel his life leaving his body...*

"Don't play games with me, Lethean! I'm tired of it! I was merely concerned about the young man's welfare. Nothing more."

The healer smiled. "Nothing?"

The tailor took a moment to gain control of himself, wishing he had a disruptor in his hands.

*Leave me alone in my grief! I have nothing to give!*

"If you would excuse me." Garak said as the turned on his heels, away from the Lethean's penetrating eyes.

"You would leave your friend to his death?" The Lethean called after him. "When he might live?"

Garak froze, then glanced from the dark human to the Trill. They returned his gaze, their expressions full of surprise and curiosity.

"What chance?" Garak challenged angrily, turning around. "No one has ever survived this!"

*I have only my revenge to comfort me.*

"His mind is very strong... very unique. But he is untrained," Morvara explained gently. "Altovar's death stopped the progress of the damage before it was too late, but Bashir is lost in his own mind. As I explained to Commander Sisko, I cannot meld with him directly to bring him back. He does not know me and would reject my attempts to guide him back to us."

"Then who?" Garak queried sharply, his curiosity overcoming his anger and grief.

The Lethean cocked her head.

"Before arriving here, I had chosen Lieutenant Dax. There is a strong friendship between them. But I see I have chosen incorrectly." She again focused on the Cardassian. "I had seen you in his thoughts, but I hadn't considered you as a possibility. I didn't think there could be a bond between a human and a Cardassian."

"There isn't," Garak insisted, unnerved.

*Is everyone seeing us as lovers except me?*

"My relationship with the young doctor is merely as an acquaintance."

"Do not lie, Cardassian," the healer chided sternly. "This is not a game of deception your people like to play. Julian Bashir is lost. Soon his body will follow. You know this. Cardassians are not without some ability of the mind and you can feel what I'm saying is true." She approached Garak. "Why do you deny your attachment to him?"

The tailor stood his ground, said nothing.

Behind him, Garak heard rapid whispers exchanged between Commander Sisko and Lieutenant Dax. He could well imagine their shock.

*Unless they've known all along too.*

"I deny nothing, Madam," Garak finally admitted. "Though I might argue with your interpretation."

The healer smiled for the first time, her sharp alien features moved as her lips tipped upwards.

"Perhaps, Cardassian, you seek to preserve your privacy. But there is no time for it." She stood nearly face to face with Garak, her red eyes became softer, more compassionate. "Do you wish him to live?"

The tailor met her gaze, then looked away.

"Of course, I do," Garak stated emphatically. Without saying more, he walked back to Bashir's bed, uncaring of any reaction he might get from the Federation people present. Their very existence no longer mattered. The tailor touched Julian's cheek, lightly caressed it, wondering how the human would react to the gesture if he were awake.

"You love him, Cardassian," Morvara whispered, her presence close behind him, her breath touching the back of his neck. "You would die for him," she continued. "I know you have already killed."

Garak couldn't even find the emotional strength to deny the healer's words, even if for appearance sake. Looking up, he saw Bashir's quarters were now empty with the exception of himself, the healer and Julian.

"What happened to our little party?"

The healer tilted her head, her hawkish features were more relaxed, her manner more purposeful. "This is not for an audience, tailor. And you have chosen. Yes?"

*Yes.*

Garak continued to caress Julian's face. The first time he saw a human, he saw only fleshy creatures who worried more about their own needs rather than the needs of society, who seemed to cry out at the slightest discomfort. He couldn't imagine living around them, much less falling in love with one.

"You haven't told me how I can help him."

"What you are doing now is a good beginning," the Lethean replied in an amused tone. "Latent empathic traits were awakened in the human when he was violated. His mind was adapting, the natural barriers that protect his psyche were merely bruised. But when Altovar violated him again, Dr. Bashir's mind was torn, his injured barriers were destroyed.

"He can rebuild those barriers again," she continued, her voice now light and soothing, "Think of it as a wall of stone, Cardassian. The first attack cracked the surface, yet left the foundation untouched. Now the wall is gone and the foundation is damaged. I need to merge with him, to show him how to repair the foundation so he can rebuild the wall. To do that, he needs someone he knows, someone with whom he has a strong empathic bonding to guide him to me. Lieutenant Dax cares for the doctor as one would a sibling. She was willing to become his guide. But you are closer to his soul, Cardassian. You and he are bondmates."

*Bondmates?!*

Garak withdrew his hand from Julian. The reaction was immediate. Pain flashed through his mind. A cry whispered through his thoughts. Instinctively, he quickly regained contact, holding Julian's hand in both of his. A rush of breath escaped the doctor's lips, almost a sigh of relief.

"What is happening, healer," he demanded.

*I have always been able to sense something of the doctor, even before we first met. But now I can feel his death coming, touching like a welcomed lover. No... This isn't impossible! Cardassians are not telepaths! She has trapped me!*

"What have you done to me?"

"My name is Morvara and I have done nothing," the healer assured. Her hands rested on Garak's shoulders from behind. The tailor felt no urge to move away. "You Cardassians are not without your talents, though out of fear you deny them because they threaten your philosophy of a well ordered society. The doctor is reaching for you, Cardassian. Even lost, he seeks you."

The tailor swallowed as the meaning of her words sank into his consciousness. The healer's touch was both soothing and disturbing. But Garak focused on Bashir, on the feel of the human's skin as his fingers slid over the doctor's hands.

"I will do what is needed to save his life. But don't ask me to take him as a mate, healer. It would be a dangerous thing for him."

Breath escaped the Lethean.

"He will need all of you, Cardassian. All. It is his life or your pride."

*Not pride, Lethean. Fear. Association with me would be dangerous.*

The Cardassian's hands moved to the human's face.

*My beautiful human...*

"You don't even know if he...would want this." Anguish marked his words. "You don't know what you ask."

"Yes, Cardassian, I do. And so do you." Morvara's voice seemed more distant, her presence in his mind more intense. "You will do what is needed to save him. He is your mate and you are his. Do you think your feelings have gone unnoticed by the doctor, even unconsciously? You would not have the ability to hold him from death now if another held his heart as you do. In saving him...you also save yourself, tailor."

Garak swallowed. His fingers continued to graze over the human's chest and shoulders.

*So smooth... so cold.*

Without prompting, he sat on the edge of the bed, wanting to explore Bashir's body further, urged on by an undeniable need for contact.

*I cannot live without you, human. I have no purpose without your wisdom. Is it possible I have found my match?*

Without warning, the Cardassian's vision shifted. A gasp escaped his lips as energy poured into his mind, his body. The physical world melted away...

*Seek him out.*

The healer's words were clear in his mind, even as he felt her hands surround his head.

*Seek him out and bring him back to me, bring him to yourself.*

The universe was reduced to flashes of sound and light. Garak's mind drew back in panic, in self-preservation.

*This is happening too quickly! I don't know what to do!*

*Calm yourself, tailor.* Morvara chided. *There is no preparation for this, only the act that needs to be done. Let the images come. Let the his mind touch you, fill you.*

Garak blinked several times. His vision cleared. He found he was still in Julian's quarters, sitting on Julian's bed, touching the doctor's body. But something was different. The room itself was smaller, vague in detail and there was no door, no visible existence beyond the two of them. The Lethean healer was gone.

"Garak?"

Garak turned towards the sound of the voice, amazed to see the doctor's eyes opened.

*Alive.*

He leaned closer.

"Julian."

Bashir stared at him, his eyes full of pain.

"Garak? It can't be." He moved weakly, trying to pull out of Garak's touch. "Some torture before the kill, Altovar?"

*Altovar?*

The air turned frigid between them. Garak reached out.

"Julian, it's me. Not Altovar."

Julian said nothing, but closed his eyes. Garak quickly noted changes in the human. Bashir body was nearly skeletal. His olive skin was pale and cold.

The Cardassian moved closer to the human, stretching out beside his friend.

"Julian, don't leave. I'm here."

"Leave me," Bashir commanded, his voice weak. "You've won the game."

"Altovar is dead, Julian," Garak said, wondering if the information would help or hurt. "He cannot be here with you now. He can never touch you again."

The doctor's eyes fluttered open. "Dead?"

"Yes." Carefully, Garak ran his fingers through the doctor's hair. "It's me."

"How?" Julian's mouth was dry, his words barely a whisper. "No, I'm imagining you."

Garak watched as Julian seem to fade even more, his body almost losing form.

"No!" The tailor pulled the doctor into his arms, only briefly surprised to find himself to be naked. "Don't go!" he pleaded the lifeless form his held. "I need you!"

At first, there was only the whispered sense of Bashir's cold body crushed against him, the dispair of loss. That bonding that seem to exist between them began to fade.

*No... don't go!*

Then a sigh breathed into Garak's mind. The human stirred, his life-force growing stronger. Relieved, the tailor pulled back to look at the young man, brushing errant wisps of hair from the flushed face.

"Julian."

Bashir groaned, his eyes fluttering.

"Garak?"

"Here, Doctor. Here." There was a growing fullness in the cheeks, a darkness returning to the skin. Giving into impulse, he leaned forward, his lips brushing the human's forehead. There was no direct physical sensation, but a sense of coolness, a sense of contact. For the Cardassian, it was enough to fuel his imagination.

"Garak," Julian breathed, his body moved with more strength, his arms came around the Cardassian's shoulders. "I must be dreaming. You can't be here."

"I am," Garak assured patiently, sensing that he would be doing this several times before the young doctor understood, willing to do whatever was needed. "Julian, Altovar is dead. There's nothing to fear from him. I've come to help you."

"Dead," Julian whispered as if hearing the news for the first time. He pulled back, his coppery eyes raking over Garak's face. "Help me?"

The Cardassian hesitated, wondering how dangerous it would be to tell the human everything.

*Too soon.* a voice, Movara's voice, drifted into his mind from far away. *You must become his shield, his foundation, his haven from where he can find his own way again. You are his mate...*

"Julian," Garak ran his hands down the human's back, noting the body in his arms was no longer near death, but full and lean. The face close to his was Bashir's, full of a male beauty and innocence that drew the Cardassian from the first day he'd seen the young doctor arrive at the station. With purpose, Garak continued sliding his hands over Julian's back, pleased when the human did not draw away. "Can you feel me?"

Bashir frowned as if trying to make sense of the words.

"You're holding me... rather close." He shifted, his expression changing. Like a rush of wind, Garak felt Julian's presence in his mind, a faint whisper in his thoughts. "This is strange."

Garak continued to caress Julian, feeling the bond between them strengthen. Feelings of desire stirred within him, the need for intimacy with the being he held.

As if receiving knowledge of this, Bashir's eyes widened, his expression softened. His attention seem to shift from his own concerns to Garak. With a small smile, the human's fingers skimmed over the Cardassian's chest.

"Garak, I can feel you want me. In here..." Julian tapped his own forehead, then leaned closer, his hands caressing Garak's face. "I love you."

It was all the Cardassian could do not to crush the human as he hugged Bashir close.

*I love you.*

The words were not empty, but full of the understanding and desire Garak thought he would never know, never deserve. "I would be a hollow shell without you in my life," he declared.

Somewhere, the universe shifted. Garak gasped as waves of need cascaded off of the doctor as Julian's lips touched him in a phantom caress. Bashir's thoughts and emotions hungrily sought him out, seeking shelter in the Cardassian's mind.

Hesitantly, Garak returned the gestures, letting his own needs filter out to the human. It was strange, this gentle exchange, this response to another's need.

As a Second to Enabran Tain, as the Obsidian Order's most highly skilled torturer, Garak had learned to accept no other emotion but his own. Like many at his level of service, he was highly disciplined, turning his back on the pleas and cries of the prisoners he was ordered to cripple or maim, even kill. Love was unknown to torturers. Sex was only a show of loyalty and Elim Garak's loyalty was always with Enabran Tain...

*But Tain, they were children! Children! We're leaving this miserable world tomorrow! What difference could it make!*

*You have betrayed me! Betrayed the Order! You have weakened us in the eyes of all Cardassia. Worse, when you let those... children go, you showed weakness to the enemy! You are a disgrace!*

Garak shivered mentally and physically. Guilt rose inside of him as the unwanted memory streaked unbidden through his thoughts, pounding him like a fist.

*I don't want to remember this!* he protested.

"Garak, don't!" Julian's hands were on the tailor, his presence shimmered in Garak's mind. The handsome face twisted in pain. "Don't leave me! I need you!"

Garak took a deep breath, then another.

"I'm sorry," he said to Julian, wondering when he'd ever said those words to anyone else and meant it. "You know what I am, what I was. I'm not worthy of you."

*I've only come to save you, not draw you into my ugly life.*

"You are no longer the person you were when you were with Tain," Julian declared with a tone of absolution. "You asked me to forgive you once, for all that you had done." He took Garak's hand in imitation of another time nearly two years ago. "I told you then that I forgave you. I meant it."

With that gesture, with Bashir's words, protective barriers between himself and the human faded. Their emotions and thoughts mixed and merged, drawing them together as a weaver would draw fibers together to make a cloth. Garak sighed, taking comfort in the unconditional feeling of love radiating from the human. In return, Julian pressed against him in total trust, total need. The Cardassian caressed blindly, sensing the unreality in his touches here in Julian's mind, yet taking comfort in Bashir's acceptance of them.

In time, the tailor was lost in the thoughts and emotions of Julian Bashir. Desires gave a kind of reality to brushes of fingers and hand, to the rubbing of bodies. The rush of the doctor's needs engulfed him.

Garak understood then what the healer was seeking. On the edges of his perception, he could feel the static of the outside world begin to intrude. In his arms, Julian suddenly stiffened as if sensing it as well. Through the fragile link they shared, he knew the doctor was beginning to understand what was happening.

"This isn't real!" Julian cried out in sudden discovery. "I thought..." Bashir drew back, his expression holding a mixture of surprise and something Garak had hoped never to see again. His copper eyes searched their surroundings as if seeing and understanding for the first time. "This is a lie!"

"No!" Garak felt something rip within his mind. Julian's presence was leaving him. "I came to save you! I came to bring you back!"

Noises filled the air. Whispers invaded Garak's ears. Julian gasped, pressing his hands to his head as if to shut it out. The tailor watched helplessly. He tried to reach out, to draw the human into his arms.

"Don't touch me!" Julian scrambled out of the bed, now fully clothed in Star Fleet uniform. "You've managed to trick me again!"

"Julian!" Garak begged as he leaped out of the bed, ready to grab Julian. Inner knowledge told him if Bashir got away there would be no second chance.

"No one has tricked you."

The serene feminine voice halted Garak. He turned to see the Lethean healer at the foot of the bed. Her eyes were focused on Bashir.

"You've been lost to us, child."

In all his years, even as a torturer, Garak had never seen a more terrified look on any being's face as he saw on Julian Bashir's at this moment. Waves of confusion and terror crashed over Garak, further damaging the bond between them.

"Julian!"

"No!" Bashir slid along the wall, away from the Lethean, from Garak. "This is another game! You told me Altovar was dead!"

"Do I look, or feel like Altovar?" the Lethean asked patiently.

Julian seem to pause, to consider. But again the noise, the static, the whispers of the outside world invaded. Garak winced, but Julian howled. Then Bashir ran blindly, past the Lethean through a door that suddenly seem to appear.

"No!" Garak glared at the Healer. "Why didn't you stop him! What's happening!"

"I cannot touch him yet, Cardassian," Morvara said quietly. "He was regaining consciousness when the conscious minds of this station attacked him. The doctor is still without his shields and has nothing to protect him from the thoughts and emotions of every being on the station. To defend himself, he runs to hide because the pain is too intense for his weak body to process. He is disoriented, confused and his thoughts and emotions are random and extreme. You must make him believe you can protect him before I can do my work for him." She indicated the door. "Follow him!"

"How?" Garak looked down at himself, relieved to see that he was also dressed once more. "Where has he gone?"

"You have forged a path into his mind, now follow the trail, Cardassian," Morvara instructed. "I will be waiting."

Then she was gone and the phantom door slid open. Garak moved cautiously, feeling a sense of dread. It was the station, but there was a sense of disarray. The tailor called the doctor's name several times as he moved, wondering how he could search, where he could search.

Then the answer was clear. The sense of the doctor's presence drew the Cardassian. Garak ran through the station, pausing as parts of the station seem to meld together, creating an altered path that forced the Cardassian to retrace his steps.

*Julian, don't leave! Don't run!*

Garak ran down the steps to the Promenade.

*Let me find you safe.*

Garak paused at the entrance to his own shop. He hesitated, then called for lights. To his relief, his requested was granted as the darkness was illuminated.

"Julian!"

"Here."

Bashir's voice was weak. Garak walked in, surprised to find the human simply standing by the cutting table, his face drawn and pale. The Cardassian approached carefully.

"Julian, I wasn't lying. The Lethean you saw is a healer. She is trying to help you. Please believe me."

Tears ran down the human's face.

"I don't know what to believe. I understand I'm inside my own mind again. But everytime I've tried to leave... the voices... the pain." He faced Garak. "If you're really here, you must think me a coward."

Garak took Julian in his arms, letting his love for Bashir flow into the tired body he held. He was encouraged when the doctor's head fell onto his chest.

"You are a man of courage and honor, Julian. As I told you during our last lunch, you survived because you are strong. You've even survived this. Now you need to come back to all of us...or you'll die here."

"No is here to harm you, child," Morvara's gentle voice filled Garak's shop. "The tailor is here to guide you."

Julian shivered, but did not pull away.

"Who are you?" he demanded even as he kept his face hidden against Garak.

"Morvara," came the patient reply. Garak watched the tall alien moved through his store towards them. "Child, your body cannot survive without a mind to fill it. You need to come back."

"I want to, but I can't." Julian pulled carefully as if testing Garak's hold. The Cardassian smiled, realizing Bashir would not escape him again.

"Yes, you can." Morvara moved until she was standing in front of them. "You have the ability to rebuild what Altovar took from you, with the help of your bondmate."

"Bondmate!" Julian drew back, his dark eyes fastened on Garak. Garak returned the gaze fearfully.

*He will reject me.*

But then the human smiled, reaching up to run his fingers down the tailor's face. The sensations had an unreal quality, but the Cardassian moaned softly in response.

*Bondmate. Yes...*

"Let him be your shield, child," Morvara instructed in a tone that caressed them both. "Use his love, his need for you to become your foundation. Let your trust allow me to show you the way back."

Julian studied the Lethean for several seconds, then Garak. Garak returned the scrutiny, his own fingers stroking the soft dark hair on Julian's head.

"Trust me," he whispered.

Bashir nodded. "Yes, I trust you." He faced Morvara, his expression now determined. "Help me."

Morvara smiled a Lethean smile.

"Your journey has already started." She raised both her hands, resting each one on the head of both men. "This is your path..."

**********

There was a moment of pain, of resistance, of fear...then acceptance. Garak felt Julian's mind within his own, a precious jewel that he wrapped himself around, guarding it from the onslaught of pain and fear. For an eternity there was no other thought but the love he felt for the doctor and the fierce need to protect. Then his skin began to burn, Julian's presence began to fade. Garak cried out and ruthlessly tried to hold on. But the healer's presence calmed him, reassured him that all was well. For a moment, the Cardassian's senses reeled at the center of a quiet storm, then balanced as the energy faded.

"Wake up, tailor. It is done."

Morvara's voice reached his ears. Garak groan, then rolled to his side.

*To his side?*

The Cardassian opened his eyes.

*Julian?*

The doctor lay beside him, his eyes closed in peaceful slumber. Morvara sat next to the human on the other side of the bed, her hands hovering above the handsome face. Garak's first instinct was to attack, to place himself between Julian and the Lethean, to protect the human. As if sensing this, Morvara sighed and lifted her hands away from the doctor.

"Your instincts are good, Cardassian," the healer said, her tone light. "Dr. Bashir will need protection for some little time to come."

Garak sat up, automatically reaching for the human, then stopped.

*We're back into reality. The rules are not the same. I cannot presume the feelings are the same here. I don't even know my feelings right now.*

"Is he all right?"

"He will recover," Morvara replied. "His mind is extremely adaptive, more so than I've found in most humans. His natural shielding has been re-established. With rest and care, he should fully recover."

*Fully recover...*

Garak's eyes wandered over the doctor, relief flooding his mind.

"Thank you."

"I have *you* to thank, Cardassian." The Lethean stood, then paused to pat Bashir's face. "You and he have a destiny. I sense this. Relations between Cardassia and the Federation may yet find common ground because of the bond that exists here."

"That's a rather precocious statement," Garak challenged, unnerved by the prediction, mainly because he could sense its truth. "Perhaps Bashir will find fame as a healer. He seems destined. But I have had my moment of power and glory. I'm a middle aged exile with no hope of ever seeing my homeworld again. The young man's fascination with me will probably fade in time and he will find someone more suitable to his position."

"You assume he is as short-sighted and prejudiced as many of your own people." Morvara began walking around the bed towards the door. "Watch him, Cardassian. I will come to see him later. I will be on the station for as long as necessary and help until Bashir is ready." Without further conversation, she walked out of Bashir's quarters.

Garak stared at the doorway, then sighed.

*Too much has happened... Too many dreams and fantasies created and shattered...*

"Oh, Garak..."

Startled, the Cardassian turned his head. Bashir's dark eyes were opened and turned in his direction. Garak responded without thought, his hands slid over the smooth face, noting the 'reality' in this touch, the warmth of the skin beneath his fingers.

"Julian."

Bashir smiled, his face still drawn but gaining color.

"Thank you."

*Thank you. As if it is something I took trouble to do.*

Garak ruthlessly suppressed an urge to kiss the human, to do some intimate act to show his relief. "You have nothing to thank me for, my young friend."

"Oh. Don't I?" Bashir moved slowly, awkwardly, to close the small space between himself and Garak. "I think I do."

Julian's cool warmth pressed against Garak, enticing him. The Cardassian was at a loss.

"No. Julian." Gently, the tailor pushed Julian away as he moved to sit up. Bashir was safe, the intimacy was not needed.

*You do this in reaction to our experience, not because you... want me.*

"Doctor, I can't--"

"Can't what, Garak?" Bashir asked tiredly. "I don't have the strength to chase you."

The tailor stopped. Waves of anxious fatigue washed over him, from the human.

*He is still inside of me.*

"This is too strange for me," he admitted.

"It's all right." Bashir assured in a quiet, gentle voice. "Morvara... talked to me." His fingers began to explore the ridges around Garak's eyes. "I'm all right and am going to be fine." He smiled brightly. "I love you."

Julian's admission, in this reality, stirred Garak. Bashir's touch was light, arousing. The tailor swallowed hard. His body screamed to return the caresses, to make love to the human. But he ruthlessly held himself back.

"You don't love me, Julian. You can't. I'm not... for you."

Bashir frowned. Suddenly he struggled to sit up. His hands gripped Garak's shoulders, pulling the tailor forward with surprising strength. The kiss was light, but passionate. The Cardassian groaned, fighting his own desires as well as those surging from the doctor.

*No, he's tired. Still weak. I'll hurt him. He doesn't understand what his really wants....*

"What are you afraid of, Elim?" Julian said, using the tailor's first name. His left hand traveled down Garak's chest, pausing just above his groin. "I love you. I mean it. You and I are friends...and more. Even if we didn't understand that before this happened." He smiled and cocked his head. "After all... we are bondmates."

*Bondmates* Garak touched Bashir's face, then his shoulders. *This is too precious a gift. I'm not worthy.*

"Don't!" Bashir winced. "Don't cut yourself off from me! I don't think I could stand it! Not now." His hand grazed over the cloth covering the Cardassian's cock. Garak gasped with the excitement that spread over every nerve of his being. "Kiss me, Garak," Julian whispered seductively. "I'm tired of initiating this."

Garak studied the human's face.

"I don't want to hurt you. You were almost dead. Now you want me to have sex with you." He tried a smile in an effort to take the sting out of his next words. "I'm too old for you. I've hurt so many people and took pleasure in it. You can never trust me."

"I've trusted you with my life," Bashir countered, pressing closer to the Cardassian. "I've trusted you with my sanity." His lips hovered less than an inch from Garak's. "Now I trust you to love me."

Love... Garak's eyes wandered over the human's face, his body. Swallowing hard, the tailor touched the bare chest, trailing his fingers over the lean torso, hesitating to explore two points of hard skin... nipples they were called. He stroked them and Bashir groaned.

"Are these sensitive?"

"Very," Julian replied, relaxing. "Kiss me, Garak," he commanded. "Make love to me."

"I'll hurt you," the Cardassian warned. "You need to rest." His fingers continued to caress.

"I need to feel you against me." Julian tugged at the tailor's shirt. "Get undressed and hold me."

*Yes, that will please the human. Then he will rest and think better of his choices later.*

Garak stripped off his clothing, his boots. Nude, he returned to the bed, to Julian's side and drew the physician into his arms, the doctor's back against his chest. Humans were cooler than Cardassians, smaller, softer. Julian sighed, fitting against him as if born to it. Garak wrapped himself around the doctor, feeling the first stirrings of need.

"Mmmmm, that's nice." Julian's voice was low with seduction. Sexual desire flowed from Bashir. Without thinking, Garak slid his hand down the human's side.

"You are beautiful, my young friend," Garak whispered, continuing his caresses, moving his hand from the lean abdomen to Bashir's chest, again rubbing the hard nipples, noting their change of feel and texture as the doctor became aroused. Garak dared a kiss on the human's shoulder. "Go to sleep, Julian. You need to rest."

"Love me," Bashir insisted, his tone firm. "I need you to love me."

*But I already love you.*

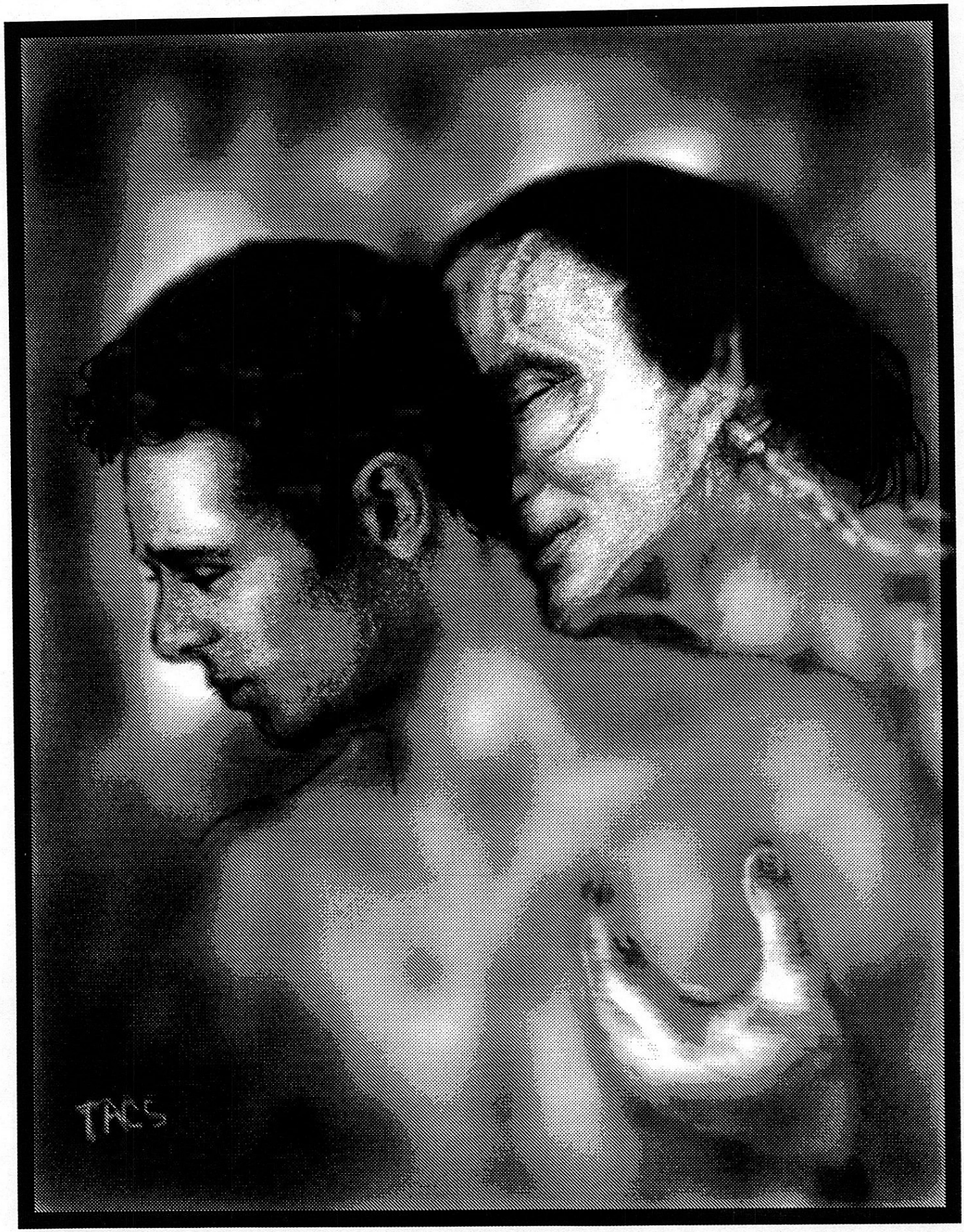
Almost against his will, Garak's strokes became more stimulating, for both of them. Julian seem to shiver in reaction. The Cardassian smiled.

"This is too soon," he protested one more time.

*Later, you will see your error You will not see me as a lover.*

"Garak, this is long overdue." In one motion, Julian moved and turned over so he was facing the Cardassian. His eyes raked impatiently over Garak. "I won't change my mind. After all," he added in a firm whisper. " I know what I want." Julian boldly reached down, his hand brushing Garak's cock.

The stimulation was too much to resist. Garak gasped and sealed his lips to Bashir's. Julian groaned, returning the kiss hungrily, seeking deeper contact. The hands of both men moved and caressed. Garak's lips began moving over the human's chest, relishing the salty taste. Beneath his hands, Bashir twisted weakly, his hands petted the Cardassian's hair.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Intimacy... Garak drew back to look at his companion. Bashir's chest was heaving, his head was thrown back, his smell was changing to one that excited the Cardassian further.

*I've never known this, human. It frightens me.*

"Don't be afraid, Garak," Julian whispered as if the words were spoken. The human picked his head up to gaze at his lover. "Morvara told me that the intensity of our bond won't stay at the level it's at now." He smiled, his cheeks flushing. "I want to know what it feels like to make love this way, to feel your pleasure and mine."

*Julian...*

Garak's fingers lightly grazed over Bashir's torso. Pleasure coursed through his own mind even as Bashir laughed delightedly.

"I am dangerous, Julian Bashir. There are those who would see me suffer with your death if they know of us."

"Then we'll have to be careful, won't we?" Bashir laid his hands over Garak's. "I'm not as fragile as you seem to think."

*No, not fragile.* Garak sighed, taking comfort in Julian's grip.

*But delicate... precious...*

The tailor raised the doctor's hands to his lips. Bashir closed his eyes, his tongue peeking out to lick his lips. The Cardassian quickly moved up, capturing the human's lips, seeking that tongue. Minutes passed in passionate kisses. Then Garak began his journey again, his lips pausing to caress and suck the nipples.

"Yes, Garak. Yes." Bashir arched, his aroused cock brushed Garak's side. "Oh, yes!"

Garak pulled back, a smile moving his lips as he also felt the erotic pleasure. He took the moment to assess his human, to study the hardened genitalia. Human penis' were slightly smaller and had no real ridges. It was a rod, sheathed in thick skin that moved, revealing a moist rigid head. And behind this organ were sacks. In Cardassians, these were internal and far less vulnerable.

*And less accessible.*

Garak gently petted the sacks, gasping with delight as Bashir moaned.

He slid further down the human's body, his attention completely taken by the bobbing cock. With Tain, this was how it was. Enabran would demand his time, his mouth for a few minutes of pleasure and release in a tense moment. Enabrin's pleasure, not Garak's. Now it would be his pleasure, and Julian's. With some anticipation of the taste, Garak lowered his head, his tongue lapping the cock's head.

"Garak," Julian sighed as if speaking a prayer. His hand touched the tailor's head. "You don't have to, Garak. I don't want you to feel I'm like--"

"Don't speak his name, Doctor!" the Cardassian commanded in a tone sharper than he intended. "I do this for you!" He again licked the head, tasting some fluid that leaked from the center. Deciding he liked the taste, he became bolder, his tongue exploring the entire shaft, learning its pleasures through the bond he and Julian were sharing.

Bashir cried out, his hands combed through the Cardassian's hair, encouraging. But Garak needed no encouragement. His mouth encompassed the organ, drawing on it, stimulating it with his tongue and teeth. Julian's thoughts quickly became lost to pure sensation that hit Garak in waves. The Cardassian lay between the human's legs, his hands wrapped around the doctor's buttocks, encouraging the wild thrusting.

In the midst of the pleasure, Garak felt his own aroused organ become hard and needy, an unfamiliar sensation in his experiences with Tain. Suddenly, hundreds of fantasies, imaginings he'd kept hidden, even from himself, passed through his mind. Julian seem to sense them, too. His thrusts became desperate, his cries full of pain and pleasure. Garak found himself thrusting his own cock into the mattress, seeking his own release.

Then the universe paused, pain and pleasure merged as one. Julian let out a long cry, his hips pumping once, then twice. Garak took every drop of the warm liquid, enjoying it's taste, reveling in its source. Then his own body convulsed, his own organ emptied itself, his own body collapsed as he released the human's shrinking cock from his mouth.

"Garak?"

Julian's voice was a whisper, a shade of its normal timbre. Concerned, Garak lifted his head and moved up to lay beside his lover.

"Are you all right?" the tailor asked, his hand gently petting the human's skin.

"Fine." Julian's eyes were closed, his face pale but relaxed. "I'm sorry. I want to do something for you, but I don't have the strength. That was fantastic!"

Garak drew the human into a brief kiss.

"Don't apologize. I have had my pleasure of you, doctor. You need to rest." He gathered Bashir into his arms, easily fitting the human's back against him as if it had always been this way. "The healer said you need rest"

Julian tensed. Oddly, the Cardassian felt sensation more vaguely. The intensity of the bond between them was beginning to fade, though Garak suspected it would not break completely.

"When we do this again, I want to be the one to give you pleasure. Promise you'll let me?"

*Promise? When we do this again?*

Garak felt tremors of hesitation.

*Again?*

"You want this... between us? You could do better."

Julian sighed, then yawned.

"Never."

The Cardassian sensed a sudden relaxation. Lifting himself, his brushed hair from the side of Julian's face, observing the young man's features relaxed in sleep, the regular even breathing.

"Yes, my human," he said aloud, to himself. "I believe whether it is wise, or prudent you have made yourself a part of my life, and me a part of yours."

The yawn that took Garak, the fatigue that flooded into his body caught the Cardassian by surprise. He eased against the human, closing his eyes at once.

*I love you.* he thought as sleep took him.

*I know.* came Bashir's whispered reply.

**********

Hours later, the door to Bashir's quarters slid open. The Lethean healer stood in the threshold, her eyes studying the tableau before her. The Cardassian's nude body was wrapped around the human, protective even in exhausted sleep. Quietly, she approached, making little noise as she scanned both men, her expression becoming less professional and more relaxed as she studied the results. Briefly, she touched Bashir's head, then Garak's. Each man's breathing became deeper, their sleep more sound.

Satisfied, she left the doctor's quarters for her other duties, allowing the lovers a long, healing rest.

# THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

## by Alana Grayson

**(Story takes place after The X-Files episode "Gender Bender")**

**Home**
**Thursday, 10:58 p.m.**

The phone was ringing.

I put the carton of milk back in the refrigerator and went out to the living room with my cereal. It had been one of those promotional boxes; small enough to fit inside a mailbox, but big enough to satisfy anyone who's lost his appetite. I set the bowl on the coffee table and retrieved the phone from the laundry basket by the far end of the sofa.

"Mulder."

A far away voice on the other end said, "Hi."

"Scully?" I hollered down the phone without thinking.

The woman on the line cleared her throat. "It's Marge Scully. I apologize for calling so late."

I squeezed my eyes shut, realizing just how thoughtless I had been. I sank down on the sofa. "That's okay."

"I just wanted you to know that," she paused to clear her throat again, "the whole family appreciates everything you've done-- you've been doing."

"That's okay," I said again, lamely.

"Well, we're very grateful." She took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm calling to let you know that we've decided to go ahead with the memorial service."

"Are you sure?" I was stunned. "Don't feel you have to rush into anything, Mrs. Scully."

"We're not. Her brothers and I feel we owe it to Dana's friends, to give them the opportunity to say good-bye. Then, later, if her body-- "

"You don't owe anybody anything," I said quickly.

She sighed. "To tell you the truth, I don't think I can take much more. Someone new calls every day. Her friends, colleagues, our out-of-state relatives. They all offer support--and I know they care-- but it all comes back to discussing my feelings over and over again. I'm so tired of talking and thinking about it. I just need some sort of closure."

"I understand," I said, even though I didn't.

We fell silent and I think we each found comfort in the other's breathing.

Marge Scully and I had never met. I had taken an occasional phone message from her at the office and she had allowed me to call Dana away from a few family dinners. We had exchanged small talk at these times and Dana had once made a passing remark about her mother's being "curious" about me. Only recently had our conversations become more concrete and in less than two days, we would come face to face under the worst possible circumstances.

"I was wondering," she said slowly, "if you'd care to say a few words at the service."

"Your daughter meant a great deal to me, Mrs. Scully. I don't mind saying that."

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for saying so."

She sounded as if she had finally mastered her composure, though I sensed that she wanted to draw the conversation to a close. She had probably been making similar calls all night, if not all day, but I was probably the first person to challenge her decision.

"Do you have a pen? I'll give you the information."

The service was scheduled for two o'clock Saturday afternoon at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow. I vaguely wondered if the family belonged to this church or if it had been a subconscious choice on the part of Marge Scully, a woman who hadn't long been a widow when she had to watch the loss of her younger daughter played out on CNN.

As I hung up the phone, I clicked on the t.v. hoping to crowd Mrs. Scully's voice out of my head. I immediately recognized the stretch of Pennsylvania farmland that appeared.

The voice-over said, "a religious sect known as the 'Kindred,' a group not unlike the Amish in their tradition of simple living. Andrew--"

My mind flinched at the name and I flipped to the next station.

"Dana Scully, a special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation--- "

I moved my finger to switch channels again, but paused as Dana's face filled the screen. The Bureau had released her badge photo to the media.

"I miss your face, Scully," I muttered to myself.

Whatever tabloid show it was, just as suddenly cut to footage of the explosion and fire. I zapped to the next channel, where "Hard Copy" promised to explain how "a local FBI agent became a victim of obsession, kidnapping and ultimately the indifference of her own bureau" right after this commercial break.

It was still everywhere. I quickly surfed to MTV and let the remote clatter to the coffee table. I curled up on the sofa and closed my eyes.

Closure. Marge Scully had said. I was beginning to understand what she meant.

**Home**
**Friday, 3:10 a.m.**

QVC was touting the investment possibilities of ceramic "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers."

I pulled the throw pillow out from under my head, flipped it drool-side down and rolled over to get back to sleep. At that moment, I became aware of someone pounding on my door, which must have been what woke me in the first place.

I automatically hollered, "Take it down the hall to Pao-Hu!" Those guys often ordered pizza in the middle of the night and the less-than-literate pizza jockeys nearly always brought them to my door first. The intrusions didn't bother me nearly as much as learning that most of the jockeys were college students did.

I thought I heard someone call my name and then the knocking started up again.

"I didn't order a pizza," I shouted. I slowly unfolded into a sitting position.

"Mulder, are you there?" the guy on the other side of the door clearly said.

I didn't recognize the voice, but I got to my feet. As I shuffled to the door, rubbing my face, I thought maybe I had won a free pizza.

"Who is it?" I called as I unlocked the door.

"Steven Spielberg."

Famous directors who have more money than God rarely show up at my door unannounced and land sharks aren't known for their imagination. I opened the door, expecting to find some wise-ass delivery boy. The first thing I noticed was that the hall smelled more like a gym locker than tomato sauce.

"Mulder." There were nuances of familiarity and relief in the way my name was exhaled rather than stated.

"Yes?" I prompted him, looking him over. "Do I know you?"

He seemed to be just a couple of inches shorter and years younger than me. It was hard to tell how much he weighed since he was dressed so outrageously. His sweatshirt (OVER THE HILL) was stretched out around the middle and his pants, which I suspected were being held up by a rope, were too wide. He shifted under my scrutiny. I glanced down at his feet and saw that his tennis shoes were too small and well-worn. By his right foot, was a bundle of dark material.

I looked at his face again. I didn't want to be a bad host, but he needed a shower. His eyes were light green and his hair was rust-colored, though it could have been real rust.

"It's me," the guy said simply. "It's Scully."

TAC5

Even half-asleep, I was determined not to make the same mistake twice in one night. I stepped aside and opened the door wider, telling him, "You must be Dana's brother. Please come in."

He looked at me uncertainly for a moment, then slowly bent down to pick up the dark bundle. As he passed by, my compassion for Marge Scully quadrupled. The whole family was falling apart; this son smelled like a brewery. I let the door close.

"I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?" I asked, following him into the living room. "Steven?"

He had sat down in the chair opposite the sofa and the light from the television gave his skin a blue cast. The bundle was at his feet again.

"No, Mulder," he said quietly. "It's me. Dana."

I rubbed my face again. Dealing with a drunk without delusions was difficult enough, but this boy's statement bordered on the psychotic. I had a feeling I was in for a long night.

"Would you like some coffee?" I asked. "I was making some when you knocked."

I backed into the alcove that serves as my kitchen. My gun was on the counter where I expected to find it. I slipped the holster onto the back of my running pants and pulled my t-shirt down to cover it.

"Think, Mulder," my visitor was calling from the other room. "You've seen pictures of my brothers. And they don't look like this, do they? They look like my dad, don't they?"

I lost count of how many scoops of coffee I had just shoveled into the filter basket. He was right. Both of Scully's brothers were shorter and even stocky compared to whoever was sitting in my living room.

I shook my head and said to myself, "I must be dreaming."

"You're not dreaming," he said, standing in the archway. "But I wish I was."

From the other room, I could hear that QVC had moved on to the resale value of ceramic "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles." I had to be dreaming.

"I thought for sure you'd understand," he said. "I know it's a shock. But I never expected skepticism from Fox Mulder."

I forced a smile. "I'm not a skeptic, but I sometimes play one in my dreams."

"You're not dreaming," he said, his voice rising in frustration.

"Then you're a gender-confused ghost," I said sharply, "because Dana Scully's dead."

I had never said it out loud before. That's how I ruled out the possibility that I was dreaming. Hearing myself say it would have certainly woke me up. I was wide awake and cornered in my own kitchen by a very sick individual.

"Let me tell you what happened," he persisted.

I turned away, without turning my back on him and remeasured the coffee.

"Mulder, we were so worried about Brother Martin's murders that we didn't give Andrew's assault on me a second thought. And once Martin was captured by his own people and we found the farm abandoned and the killings stopped, it didn't cross our minds that Andrew might have slipped away and stayed behind. I certainly never thought he'd become obsessed with me."

"You could have gotten most of that from any of the tabloid shows," I growled at him, filling the coffee pot's water reservoir.

"Maybe," he said, coming toward me. "But could I have gotten this?"

He held out his hand and cradled in the palm was a small gold cross attached to a delicate chain. It didn't mean anything, I told myself. He could have noticed it in her photographs on television, some talking head could have mentioned it. Dana always wore her cross and never hid that fact. She even wore it to bed and to bathe.

I smiled, despite myself, remembering the first time I had noticed it. During our first case together, she had come to my motel room in her bra, panties, cross and little else, frantic that I check out what turned out to be misquito bites on her lower back.

"Steven Spielberg!" I gasped, suddenly remembering more about that first assignment. I had given that name when I popped over to her room to see what she was up to, on the pretext of inviting her out on an evening run. I doubt if she would have included that in a field report, even back then. So only Dana Scully would have known to use that name. It was a private code she would expect me to recognize.

"Steven Spielberg," the man in my kitchen stated matter of factly.

I grabbed him by the shoulders, looking into those familiar green eyes. "Oh, my God, Scully! Are you all right?"

Scully sighed with relief. "It's about time."

"What the hell happened to you?" I asked, leading him out to the living room. One of us needed to sit down.

I released Scully onto the sofa. I collapsed into the chair, stumbling over the bundle he had brought in. As I bent down to pick it up, I realized it was Scully's black overcoat, which was now too small for him.

"I don't remember how it started," Scully said, with a slight shake of his head. "One minute, I was walking out of my building to my car and the next, I was in a barn with Andrew."

"You were in Pennsylvania," I explained. "Apparently, the Kindred have communities all over the United Sates, possibly the world."

Scully nodded. "I figured out where I was later, after I escaped."

"But how did you escape? And how did this happen?" Now that I believed, I wanted to know everything and Scully wasn't talking fast enough.

"After the FBI surrounded the complex-- " Scully suddenly paused to ask his own ques-

tion. "How did you trace us so quickly anyway? Were there any clues?"

I bit my lip to keep from smiling. "If I tell you, you might not believe me."

"Try me."

"Your cellular phone was found about six feet from your car. That was the only clue I had."

"So?"

"So," I said evenly, "I took it to a psychic."

"And this psychic told you I had been kidnapped by Andrew and taken to Reston, Pennsylvania," Scully said doubtfully.

I laughed out loud, shaking my head. "Only you could sit there, looking like that and still not believe. She didn't tell me everything, but she did give me a few leads to go on. Our colleagues who keep track of cults were then very helpful with information on other Kindred communities.

"Would you like some coffee?" I asked, rising. As anxious as I was, I could see Scully still needed a few minutes to collect his thoughts.

"I would love some. And something to eat. I haven't eaten all day."

"Any preferences?"

"Anything, but whatever that was," Scully said, indicating the cereal from earlier that I hadn't touched. It was a swollen, soggy mess.

"We could order a pizza." I picked up the bowl and carried it into the kitchen with me. "Delivery's pretty fast around here."

"Pizza sounds great. And a salad, if they deliver them."

I ordered the pizza while I poured our coffees. Of course, I still ended up with Hu and Pao's. I had just sat down when there was a knock at the door and a voice called, "Pizza!"

Scully's eyebrows jerked up.

"Mystic pizza," I said, going to the door.

I didn't even try to explain things to the kid. Scully was starved and I had recovered my appetite. Besides, logic dictated that my pizza would be delivered to the neighbors and things would even out.

A few bites later, Scully was ready to pick up where he had left off. "It was weird, Mulder. Did you notice that the complex looked exactly like the one in Massachusetts?"

Chewing, I nodded.

"There was even the ceremonial cavern you talked about under the barn. After the FBI surrounded the building, Andrew dragged me down there for safekeeping. I was looking for a way

out when I slipped and fell into one of those 'gopher holes.' I must have hit my head because the next thing I remember is coming to and," Scully gestured to his body, "finding I had grown out of my clothes."

"So where did you get this charming outfit?" I asked.

"An old trucker picked me up once I made it out to the main road. He took me as far as the brewery he works for and fetched me some things from his locker. I got the shoes from my next lift. I've spent the greater part of the week walking and putting faith in the kindness of strangers only when absolutely necessary."

I looked him over again. It was so incredible, but I was glad to have Scully alive.

"How did you get out of the barn without us seeing you?"

Scully shrugged. "I found a tunnel that led out into a field. I expected Andrew to come after me at any moment. But then whoever was in charge out there blew up the barn. Why did they blow up the barn, Mulder? Was I that expendable?"

"No," I shook my head emphatically. "You know I never would have stood by and let them do that. It was only tear gas. But there was something in that barn that reacted with it, Scully, I'm sure of that. It took the fire crew two days to put it out."

He nodded distractedly. He must have seen it all from the field.

"Is that why you didn't come forward then?" I asked quietly.

Scully shook off his memories and gave me a slight smile. "Who would have believed me? Some half-naked man wandering in from a field, claiming to be the female hostage they were trying to save. It took me a while to believe it myself. In fact, I don't think I fully accepted it until I convinced you."

"Have you tried to switch back," I asked, "like Marty?"

"Yes! Believe me, yes." He sighed again. "I can't do it, or I don't know how. I've come to the conclusion that I am one of them, but I'm not. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," I said. I ran a hand through my hair, "God, I'd like to have Ann Landers' advice on this one. Have you thought about what you're going to do?"

Scully shook his head. "I'd like to get my old body back, but right now I'd settle for a hot shower and a place to crash."

I heard the alarm clock go off in the bedroom, reminding me that it was time to get up and go to work.

"You're welcome to my shower," I said, rising, "and my bed. Oh! And my clothes since we seem to be about the same size now."

Scully got to his feet and put out his hand. "Thanks, Mulder."

I hesitated. Scully read the look on my face.

"Do you think I produce pheromones?" There was more worry in his voice than accusa-

tion.

"I don't know." I told myself that this was Scully for God's sake. I offered him my hand. "I know you'd never hurt me."

Scully crossed his arms in front of him. "No. I don't want to know."

"I think you're going to have to find out sooner or later," I told him. "Come on, Scully, you lived through Andrew's pawing. If I feel any discomfort, we'll let go."

Scully slowly unfolded his arms and placed his hand in mine. Several seconds passed. I didn't feel nauseous or submissive. I gripped his hand tighter and began timing us with my watch. I let a full and very ridiculous minute pass.

"You don't produce pheromones, Scully," I concluded. "Like the rest of us losers, you'll have to rely on your charm."

Scully smiled weakly. "I only hope it's enough."

**FBI Headquarters**
**Washington, D.C.**
**5:06 p.m.**

I was staring at my cellular phone.

I had spent the day going over every scrap of data we had on the Kindred case, looking for some clue as to how to revert Dana's body back to its original gender and I kept coming to the same conclusion. It was the sex that killed and it was the sex that was the catalyst for Marty's transformation.

But how was I going to tell Scully to get laid?

**Cafe Petitto**
**Connecticut Ave**
**Washington, D.C.**
**7:12 p.m.**

Scully was late.

"What took you so long?" I demanded.

"Sorry," he muttered, sliding into his seat. "There was a language barrier between me and the cab driver."

He was wearing my best suit, which actually fit him better than it did me and my favorite tie. But something was off.

"Where did you learn to tie a tie like that?" I asked.

Scully shrugged, picking up his menu. "I went through an Annie Hall phase in high

school. Oh, I see I missed the appetizer." He brushed several sunflower seed shells in my direction.

"Ha. ha."

The waiter, who had come by to take our drink orders, didn't find the shells so amusing.

"So," Scully began, as soon as the waiter was gone, "what was it you couldn't tell me over the phone?"

Hoping to buy some time, I replied, "After dinner."

I almost made it, too. Our salad plates had just been cleared away when Scully said, "It's the sex, isn't it."

"No." I sighed and fished some papers out of my breast pocket. "It isn't just the sex."

I smoothed out my findings on the table between us. "Contrary to what I may have said during the case, none of Marty's victims died in the throes of passion."

Scully scanned the print-out for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't follow you."

"Think about it, Scully, there's more to sex than passion or lust. There are definite physiological changes that take place: increased heart and respiratory rates, perspiration, and--barring the use of condoms or dental dams-- an exchange of body fluid. You pointed out yourself that none of the victims or Marty used condoms."

Scully shook his head. "You're saying an exchange of body fluids killed those people? I've never heard of pheromones containing toxins."

"You don't produce pheromones. Marty only used them to attract victims...What I'm saying is, maybe these people-- the Kindred-- need the body fluid they collect to initiate their transformations. Unfortunately, it's the body fluid they deposit that's fatal to their victims."

"You may be onto something, Mulder," Scully said, picking up and studying the papers. "The two people Marty engaged in oral sex seem to have died more quickly. The fluid would have been absorbed at a faster rate in those instances."

Our dinners came. We ate quietly. Scully, I thought, concentrated a little too much on his meal.

Finally, he said softly, "Would you help me?"

I knew it would come to this. I nodded, not looking at him. "Sure...I just-- I guess I should warn you I don't have a little black book."

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what..." As I looked up at him, I suddenly realized what he meant. He meant I was dessert.

Even though I was too stunned to move or say anymore, my mind raced back over the evidence. Why hadn't I seen this coming? I should have known that Scully couldn't possibly do the wild thing with a stranger. And I should have realized that the fact that Scully was now a man,

didn't necessarily dictate a preference for women. Marty seemed to select his victims indiscriminate of gender.

At length, I managed two words. "I can't."

"You can't, or you won't?" Scully asked evenly.

I rubbed my brow, trying to avoid his eyes.

I heard Scully sigh. When he spoke again, it was in a softer tone, pitched for my ears only. "You know, when I first met you, I had to sift through a lot of rumor and innuendo about 'Spooky' Mulder. Despite my initial impression, I came to believe that you were--"

I looked up sharply and cut him off. But my voice came out in nearly a whisper. "Gay? Did you think I was gay?"

"--open to extreme possibilities," Scully finished.

I sat back in my chair. "Sorry, but this is a little too extreme. Even for me."

It was his turn to avoid my eyes. He kept his on the table as he said, "You're the only one I trust. And I have to get back."

My head was shaking before he ever finished. "I can't."

Scully took a deep breath and rose from the table. "Then, thanks for nothing, partner."

With that, he snatched up my car keys from where I had carelessly tossed them on the table and bolted for the door.

**Badlands**
**22nd St.**
**Washington, D.C.**
**10:00 p.m.**

The cabdriver was asking for his money for the second time.

"This is the place you wanted, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said. I had spotted my car and made him pull over.

"This your first time?" he asked.

I pulled out my wallet and paid the fare. My hand closed around the door handle and I froze. I turned back to the cabby and, for reasons I still can't explain, told him I was an FBI agent.

"Well, I hope you get your man," he said, counting his money.

Somehow I made it from the cab to the club entrance. There was a five-dollar cover charge. I paid quickly and ducked inside.

It was early yet for the club scene. There was a good crowd, but not the tight press of bodies I had expected, making it easier to scan for Scully. The music was loud and, if this place was like most clubs, wouldn't be turned up to deafening until about eleven o'clock.

Looking around, I saw that I was over-dressed. The uniform du nuit seemed to be jeans, preferably black and tight. Scully must have honed in on the strains of taught denim.

I caught quite a few eyes as I looked for that one particular shade of green, though everyone kept his distance. Mine is not a pretty face.

The club was enormous. Every time I was almost ready to abandon my search, I found another room. There were four bars in all, including a video bar. That's where I found Scully.

He looked at ease, sitting on a stool with a mixed drink in his hand. He was turned slightly sideways, with his elbow resting on the bar. A youthful-looking blonde man had him engaged in conversation. I nearly turned on my heel and left, but then Scully shook his head slightly and the blonde man wandered off. I quickly took his seat, facing Scully with my back to the bar.

"Come here often?" I hollered to Scully over the din of a Nine Inch Nails video.

He hadn't lost the inherently feminine talent for withering looks. He probably expected an apology; I didn't think I had anything to apologize for.

"Did you ever see the 'Crying Game'?" I shouted.

Scully squinted at me through the dim, smoky haze. He shook his head, not in answer to my question. This was often Scully's way of telling me I wasn't making any sense.

"You know," I bellowed, "that movie where this guy goes to bed with a girl who turns out to be a man. I just thought that would be a hell of a thing to do to somebody. Somebody who's not expecting it."

I hoped Scully would get the hint. Instead, he ordered another club soda with lime.

"And I thought of something else," I said, leaning closer to him in the interest of saving my voice. "What if it's painful?"

"The sex?" Scully asked, as if he hadn't been giving me the cold shoulder.

"The transformation!" I shouted. "And the sex."

"That's not your concern, Mulder!"

"You're my concern!" I hollered. "Right now, I'm the only one who knows you're alive!"

Scully shook his head. "Go home, Mulder!"

"I'm not leaving here without you!"

"You can't do anything for me, remember? You just can't!" He threw my words back in my face.

"At least let me try!" I took a deep breath. "Let's at least go somewhere we can talk without hollering at each other. And if it doesn't work out, I'll ask Hu and Pao to set you up with

someone."

"You can't try," Scully nearly screamed at me. "You can't just change your mind."

"Sure, I can," I lied. Trying to lighten the mood, I promised, "Three beers and I'll do anything."

Scully shot me a look that I'm sure was meant to blind me. He turned away in disgust.

I reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm not leaving here until you agree to let me try to make love to you!"

"You go, girl!" This from the bartender, who looked like a cross between RuPaul and Isaac Hayes.

I snatched back my hand, completely mortified.

Scully burst out laughing. He pulled a few crumpled bills from his jacket pocket and dropped them on the bar. Plucking at my suit sleeve, he led me out chuckling periodically.

In the cool night air, everything seemed right again. There was no anger between us and no need for apologies. We headed for the car, side by side, in silence. However, there was something I needed to say and as I reached the driver's door, I nearly said it.

"Scully." I looked at him across the roof of the car.

"Oh, sorry," he said, and tossed me the keys.

I waited until we were both seated and tried to get it out again. "There's something I haven't told you."

"Yeah?"

"The reason I changed my mind," I began. I looked into those familiar eyes-- the mirror to the soul, as they say-- but I could feel myself backing out.

"Yes, Mulder?"

"You're mom's holding a memorial service for you tomorrow at two." It wasn't exactly a lie, though I felt like a real shit for using it as my motive.

"Oh, my God," Scully murmured. After a time, she whispered, "Poor mom."

We rode back to my place without another word.

**Home**
**Around midnight**

Scully was opening my second beer.

"You're not insulted, are you?" I called from my position on the sofa.

"By what?" Scully asked, crossing the short distance from the kitchen to living room. "By the fact that your male ego has to be anaesthetized before you can even attempt intimate physical contact with another man?"

I accepted the bottle that was offered to me. "And you've been spared the burden of male ego?"

Scully sat down not too close beside me and regarded me with just a hint of a smirk. "I have enough to be insulted."

It must have been the beer. I nearly laughed as I shook my head. "Why? You said yourself you couldn't do it with a woman."

Scully shook his head. "I said I couldn't do it with some strange woman. If you were a woman--"

It was my turn to smirk. "You'd have vanity to contend with."

Scully sighed, but a small smile returned to his face. "Agent Mulder, are you saying the only reason I'm insulted is because I've retained the fabled feminine flaw of vanity?"

I shrugged and took another swallow of beer.

It wasn't going well for either of us and this line of banter was only making matters worse. We fell into a silence that quickly became uncomfortable. I finally excused myself to get another beer.

"Would you like a Snapple?" I called from the kitchen.

"No, thank you."

His voice had moved. I heard the t.v. snap on, video tapes being shuffled.

"What are you doing?" I asked from the doorway.

Scully was turning an unlabeled tape over and over in his hands. "Come on, Mulder. Your tape collection is second only to your stack of Playboys."

True. But most of my tapes were labeled.

"You have quite a reputation down at the Bureau," Scully continued, plunging the tape into the VCR.

In fact, the only tapes I didn't label were the ones that contained news footage. Those I recycled.

I was about to make this point to Scully when the now-familiar Pennsylvania farmland filled the screen. Bernard Shaw's voice-over was lost in magnitude of the explosion. And then there I was, being held back by Skinner and four other men.

Scully, who seemed mesmerized by the images up to this point, slowly turned his head toward me.

It was time for the truth.

I walked over to the VCR. I fumbled and hit 'pause' instead of 'stop.' The tape froze on Scully's badge photo. I looked up from it into the same green eyes.

"There's something else I didn't tell you," I said to the man standing in front of me.

He tried for levity. "Isn't there always?"

"I'm serious." As if to prove it, I took another step closer to him.

"I'm listening," Scully said quietly.

I glanced down at the screen again. The eyes--hers and his--were the same.

"I was ready to rush into that fire to save you. So now I'm thinking, this has got to be more pleasant."

Without giving myself time to back out or consider the implications, I leaned forward and kissed him. I don't know what my male ego was expecting, but it was pretty much the same as any kiss. With my eyes closed, I couldn't tell the gender of the lips mine were pressed against. I was emboldened by this, yet afraid I'd lose my nerve if I came up for air. The kiss lengthened and deepened.

Scully must have sensed this. He didn't break the oral contact as he maneuvered us toward the sofa. I felt the strength in his hands, but I wouldn't allow myself to be distracted by it. He was strong; I reminded myself I had never thought of Scully as weak.

One of his hands finally came to rest on the bridge of my nose, pressing my eyelids closed. Only then did he end the kiss. His body leaned into mine, urging me to lay back on the sofa. I heard the lamp click off. There was some scuffling and then the sound of the remote extinguishing the t.v.

We were kissing again. Scully was taking care not to spook me, not resting his body on mine. I won't deny that I was pretty turned on, but when his hands moved to my belt, I tensed.

"Relax," he whispered against my ear. His voice was softer in the dark. "I just need a fluid sample."

Men: gay or straight, we all want blow jobs.

I lay back and let it happen.

**Home**
**Saturday, 8:03 a.m.**

Scully was gone.

I was only half-awake and my head was fuzzy, either from alcohol or exhaustion, but I knew I was alone. My eyes groggily swept the room, including the space between the sofa and the coffee table. I sat up slowly and called out.

No answer.

The beer and Snapple bottles were scattered about the room where I expected to find them. If that wasn't proof enough that I hadn't dreamed up the past few days, my open pants were.

It hadn't worked. And Scully had left rather than face me.

I called out again, louder and my voice echoed through the empty apartment.

I rubbed my face. Where could he have gone? I got to my feet. Hu and Pao?

I stumbled toward the bedroom, pulling off my clothes and making a mental list of the most likely places Scully might have gone. His old apartment, his sister's place (Scully had once remarked that her ideas were almost as crazy as mine), back to the gay district. I'd grab a quick shower and a cup of coffee and start with those three. I only hoped he hadn't appropriated my car again.

The sight of the clothes Scully had worn the previous evening neatly folded on the foot of the bed broke my concentration. Only then did I hear the shower running.

I quickly covered the short distance to the bathroom, but I had suddenly lost my nerve and my voice. I eased the door open and leaned in, hoping a silhouette against the shower curtain would tell me all I needed to know. There wasn't enough light in the room. I stepped inside.

"Scully?"

"Yes?"

I yanked open the curtain. Scully started, but recovered quickly.

"It worked," she stated matter-of-factly.

"I can see that," I said, keeping my eyes on her face. But I had needed to see to be sure. I gently slid the plastic barrier back into place between us.

"When?" I asked.

Scully cleared her throat. "Not long after I woke up this morning. I was going to wake you." A pause. "I called my mom instead. When she finished crying, she wanted to come over to my apartment. I persuaded her to meet me for lunch later this today...Mulder?"

"Yeah."

"Would you mind going over to my apartment and picking up some clothes and things?"

"Not at all." She certainly couldn't borrow mine anymore.

"Thank you."

I made for the door, but something stopped me.

"Scully," I said into the quiet without turning around. "What if it's not permanent?"

"What?" That one word seemed to hold many emotions: disbelief, fear, sadness.

I took a deep breath. "What if-- the next time you're with someone-- you turn back into a man?"

She didn't answer right away. The sound of the shower spray grew louder in the silence. Louder still was a steady clicking sound as the shower curtain was slowly pulled aside.

I turned around and Scully held out her hand to me.

"There's only one way to find out, Mulder."

**Home**
**Saturday, 10:13 a.m.**

Scully was curled up in my robe on the sofa, sipping a cup of coffee.

I sat down on the coffee table opposite her.

"Do you feel anything?"

"Not yet." She shook her head, squeezing into a tighter ball. "I wish I knew if that were good or bad."

"You said it happened as you woke up this morning," I reminded her. "Maybe you have to relax."

She considered this a moment, then handed me her coffee. I set the cup down next to me and pulled her into an embrace. Rubbing her back, I told her everything would be okay.

Eventually, I pulled her to her feet. She led the way to the front door.

"Don't forget my shoes," she instructed me.

"I won't." With my free hand, I pulled her list out of my jacket pocket. Shoes were definitely on it, as were the specific bra, panties, pantyhose, blouse, skirt, blazer, make-up, brush, hair spray and other toiletries she wanted. "You know, there are some definite advantages to being a man."

"Well, I'm glad to hear one finally admit it," she teased me.

"Ha ha." I unlocked the door. "I'll be back as soon as I can find a truck to haul this stuff."

"And then?" She was serious again, and there was a worried catch in her voice.

I took her by the shoulders, rubbing them gently. "Then, I'll come back here...and we'll make love again."

"Whether we need to or not?"

I cupped her jaw and looked into her eyes. Woman or man, they didn't change. Woman or man, Dana Scully was the other half of my life.

I smiled down her. "Either way."

# SOULS

## K. Ann Yost

Tracking Nicholas was becoming routine. LaCroix sensed his errant child easily, feeling his emotions as if they were his own. He knew Nicholas was traveling by horse, so LaCroix was in no hurry, certain he could reach the younger vampire by dawn.

The night sky was cloudless and as he flew, LaCroix appreciated its beauty. He marveled at how the star patterns never changed, much like vampires. Or most vampires. Nicholas wanted to change, to become mortal again. And this desire was driving a wedge between the two of them.

LaCroix was determined to make Nicholas give up his dream, to see reason. So he pursued Nicholas across the desert, following the mental thread that betrayed Nicholas' presence to his master.

Suddenly, LaCroix felt sick. The feeling was external, coming from Nicholas. LaCroix flew faster.

**********

As LaCroix freed him, the younger vampire asked, "How did you find me?"

"I'll always be able to find you, Nicholas. That's our code." Though his tone was calm, LaCroix was furious with him. It wasn't just that he had run away, but had allowed himself to be tricked and poisoned by a mortal.

LaCroix stood and walked to the bounty hunter. The dead man's face was frozen in a terrified grimace, his eyes bulging and blood spattered across his face and neck. With a snarl of rage, LaCroix slammed his fist into the corpse, splitting the chest open and shattering bones. He tore out the man's heart and despite LaCroix's earlier feeding, blood still dripped from the flesh.

The vampire glanced at the organ in his hand then threw it carelessly into the underbrush. "Let the buzzards have a treat."

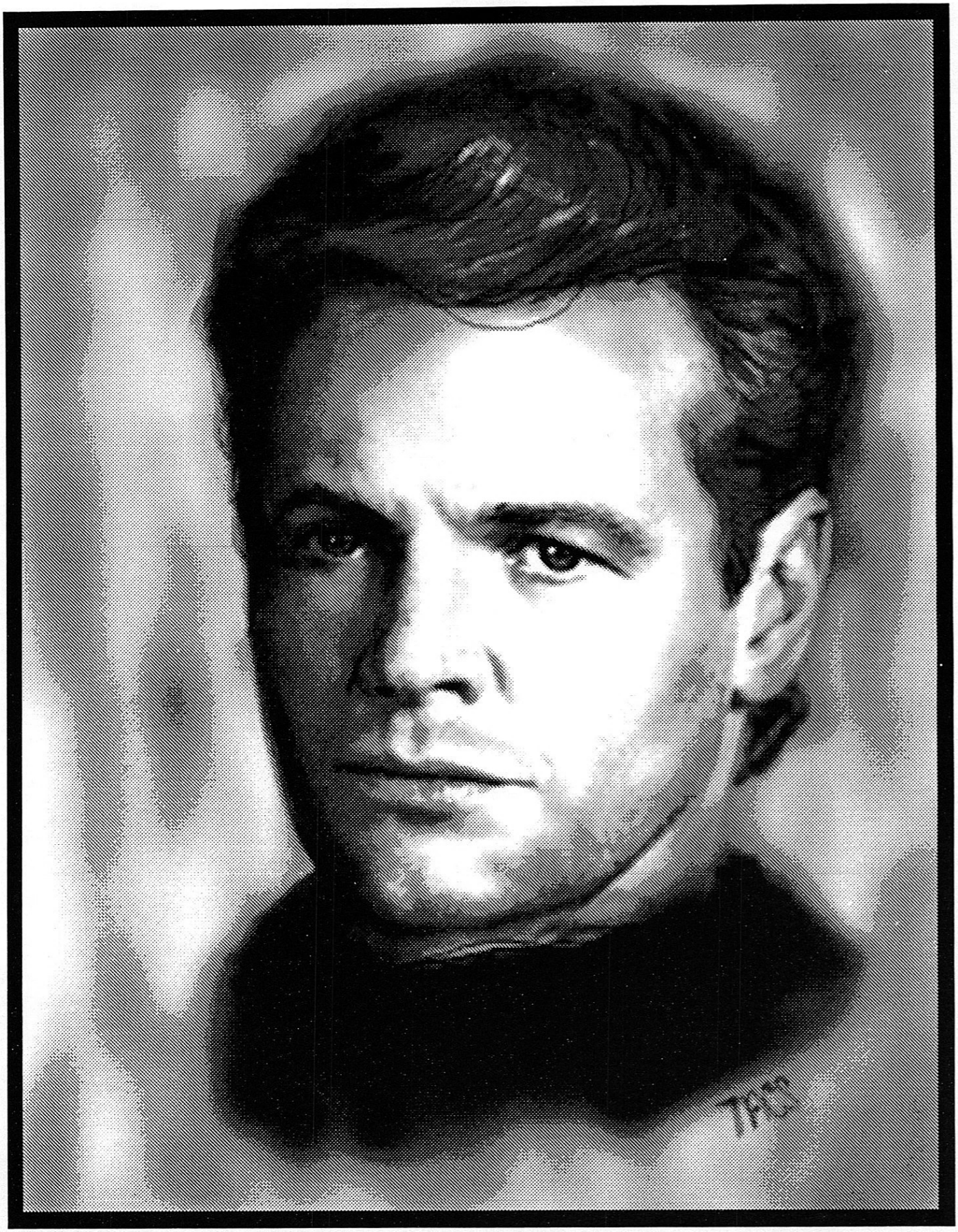
LaCroix's actions were calculated, planned to keep Nicholas off balance, teetering between confusion and fear to an acceptance of their true nature as vampires.

After licking his hand clean, LaCroix approached the two horses tied close to the campsite. They shied away, snorting in fear as he drew closer, but LaCroix petted the animals and spoke to them gently. Freeing the reins, he swatted one horse on the rump and both horses bolted.

LaCroix returned to Nicholas, brushing his hand against the younger vampire's face. "Can you walk?"

Nicholas replied, "I don't think so."

LaCroix glanced at the sky and saw the pink of the impending sunrise. He pulled Nicholas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into his arms.

"Why do you do that?"

LaCroix shook his head. "Do what?"

"That." The younger vampire pointed at the mutilated corpse.

A superior sneer crossed LaCroix's face.

"That man, that human, dared to hurt you. Only I can do that, Nicholas, only me. Now hold on."

He clung to his master's neck as they took to the night sky.

**********

LaCroix flew swiftly to the town that was serving as their temporary home. He landed on the balcony above the saloon. Nicholas struggled out of his master's grip.

"Let me go."

LaCroix complied and Nicholas fell to his hands and knees.

"I think I'm going to be sick." He got back to his feet and stumbled through the open doorway into the room. He laid on the bed, then grabbed the chamber pot stored underneath. Laying on his stomach and with his head hanging over the side of the bed, Nicholas was violently ill.

Shaking his head, LaCroix closed the balcony shutters and drew down the heavy blinds. He wished the shutters and drapes would also drown out the merry-making in the saloon below. He went to the dresser and poured water into a bowl. After dipping a rag into the water, LaCroix returned to the bed and sitting down, held the cloth against his companion's forehead, wiping at the blood sweat that had broken out along the brow.

"It's the drug, Nicholas. Just relax. Your body is getting rid of the curare. It will be over soon."

LaCroix was right, but once the retching ended, Nicholas curled into a ball, shaking.

"Something's wrong," he croaked.

LaCroix laughed.

"You've been poisoned, Nicholas, what did you expect? You can be such *en enfant*."

He grabbed LaCroix's arm, trying to speak.

His hand covered Nicholas'. "What?"

Before he could answer, Nicholas went into convulsions. Surprised, LaCroix yanked free from the bruising hold and grabbed the arms, intending to calm him. The hold wasn't enough to control the flailing body.

LaCroix released him and picked up a blanket, throwing it across Nicholas' thrashing body. Pulling the ends together, LaCroix wrapped Nicholas in a protective cocoon.

All LaCroix could do was watch and wait -- and he hated it, the lack of control. He had been sure the vomiting would take care of the poison in Nicholas' body. This seizure was surprising, frightening. And LaCroix had been so looking forward to the verbal and physical thrashing he was going to give Nicholas. His plans for disciplining Nicholas were ruined now that Nicholas was incapacitated.

LaCroix punished him after every escape attempt, yet Nicholas had run away -- again. And each time the younger vampire tried to leave his master, it was like a slap in the face to LaCroix. Over the years, his punishments became more brutal, more cruel. LaCroix hoped the punishments would be a deterrent; that he would realize that escape, as well as a cure, were delusions. Still, Nicholas was stubborn and continued his quest for freedom and a cure.

The seizure finally ended. It felt like forever to LaCroix, but less than a minute had passed since Nicholas collapsed on the bed. He pulled him close and wiped away the fresh blood that covered Nicholas' face and neck. Blood tears dripped from tightly closed eyes and LaCroix felt him trembling.

"Nicholas, *mon cher*, can you hear me?"

Frightened eyes met cool blue ones. Nicholas asked, "What happened?"

"You had a seizure. It was unexpected, but not unheard of. Vampires react differently to poison because some of us are stronger than others." LaCroix hoped his words would bury Nicholas in self-doubt and fear. His goal was to keep Nicholas close to him -- a perfect, but weaker, controlled companion.

Instead, LaCroix often found himself following a head-strong Nicholas around the world, the ever-hopeful Janette tagging along. Over the years, Nicholas disappeared many times. On the guise of hunting alone, he would instead take to flight, booking passage on a sailing ship or traveling by train to distant lands, often half the world away.

Their blood-link was strong, but great distances muted the gentle hum that was Nicholas in LaCroix's brain and heart. Sometimes the link would totally disappear and it would take years for him to track down his fledgling...and when he finally found him, it was anything but a joyous reunion.

Over the past 600 years, LaCroix had become obsessed with Nicholas to the point of madness. The older vampire was enchanted by his pale beauty, the sparkling blue eyes and silky blond hair. Nicholas' playfulness and innocence charmed the older vampire; traits that survived despite success as a predator.

But LaCroix was enraged by his pride and stubbornness. He feared that Nicholas' search for a cure of the blood-lust would make him a target for the Enforcers. Often he didn't know whether to love Nicholas or destroy him, but spending eternity without Nicholas was never an option.

LaCroix saw the exhaustion in his companion's eyes. The young vampire's rigid manner also indicated that Nicholas was fretting. LaCroix gently nudged his thoughts to intertwine with his.

There was no resistance from the younger vampire, only bitterness and a consuming

hunger.

"*Etes-vous faim*?"

Nicholas slipped out of the blanket and away from LaCroix. He went to the dresser and splashed some water onto his face. Pouring more water from the pitcher, he rinsed out his mouth.

"And what if I am?" he replied. "It's too late for hunting now; the sun's almost up."

"It's never too late."

Nicholas shrugged, pretending nonchalance.

"It can wait."

LaCroix knew he lied. He had felt the gnawing hunger that plagued Nicholas since he had given up his code of only killing the "guilty." He was relying on animal blood to sustain him, taking from horses, cows or any docile animal that strayed in his path. LaCroix found the whole situation pathetic.

"Come here."

LaCroix wasn't surprised when Nicholas remained where he was, looking down so his master couldn't mesmerize him.

"Come here!"

Before a confrontation could take place, loud voices and giggles came from outside the door. Both men froze. A key scraped in the lock and Janette nearly fell into room trying to support a large, drunk cowboy.

LaCroix was behind her in an instant, shutting the door before Nicholas could bolt.

"Ah, Janette, you brought a meal for us. How thoughtful."

Janette released her burden. The man fell onto the bed in a graceless sprawl.

"He's not for you," Janette replied, straightening her dress. Spying Nicholas by the dresser, she said, "I see you've decided to rejoin us."

"Not by choice."

"It never is, is it? Or are you just fooling yourself, Nicholah?"

LaCroix smiled. Janette, at times, was the best weapon in his quest to bring Nicholas back into the fold.

"My dear," he chided. "Nicholas isn't feeling well. Take pity on him."

The female vampire stepped closer to Nicholas. "You look dreadful. Are you ill or just hungry?"

LaCroix laughed.

"Both. Poor Nicholas trusted another mortal and got poisoned for his effort. He'd be flung over the back of a horse by now if I hadn't happened along. And with the sun just about up, well, his ashes would be joining the sand of the desert very soon.

"I know what would make you feel better." LaCroix moved to the bed and pointed to the unconscious cowboy sprawled on his back. "Can you feel him, Nicholas? Can you smell him?"

LaCroix saw his child's nostrils flare, teeth biting into his lower lip.

"Though he's sleeping, his lust for Janette oozes from every pour. I bet if you taste him you won't be affected by the alcohol in his body."

Nicholas remained frozen against the wall, but Janette drew close to her catch. She leaned down to breathe the scent of the sleeping cowboy. Her eyes turned bright yellow and her fangs peeked out from beneath her lips. She reached out, touching the man's genitals through the cloth of his trousers. The man shifted restlessly and groaned in pleasure.

Janette was a true predator and LaCroix encouraged her behavior. He came behind her and unbuttoned her dress, removing the garment from her milk-white shoulders. She stepped out of the clothing and lay on the bed.

Uninhibited by her companions' presence, she grabbed the man's head and bit into his neck. She sucked hard, foregoing finesse for greed.

Intent on Janette, LaCroix almost missed Nicholas' mad scramble for the door. He caught him just as his hand closed on the doorknob. LaCroix grabbed the weakened vampire by the waist, just for an instant, crushing him against his chest. Just as quickly, he threw Nicholas on the bed.

Janette was also quick, her hunger sated but her lust was reaching a crescendo.

"*Nicholah*," she purred. Janette pulled him on top of her, pushing his head against the lace of her bodice.

He was lost. Breathing in the scent of fresh blood and sex made Nicholas heady. He ripped open the satiny blue undergarment that covered Janette's lithe form. LaCroix laughed in triumph.

Despite his ravenous hunger, Nicholas carefully nipped Janette's right breast, gently nursing. Janette arched into his weight and rubbed her hands along Nicholas' back and ass. Grabbing the back of his shirt, she ripped the fabric from his back. Janette ran her sharp nails down his back, leaving small trails of blood in their wake.

Janette cupped Nicholas' ass and prodded him to raise his hips. He rolled to the side and they both managed to remove the rest of their clothes with little fuss. Once naked, Nicholas was back at Janette's breasts, nuzzling gently.

Content to be a voyeur, just for the moment, LaCroix watched Nicholas' hands stray to her thighs. She spread them and moaned when he fingered the sensitive folds of skin. Impatient to receive him, Janette growled and took her frustration out on the unconscious man lying next to her. She lashed out with her leg and kicked him off the bed and onto the floor.

Though he wasn't hungry, LaCroix walked around the bed and finished the cowboy. Janette had fed deeply, so LaCroix was only able to suck a few precious drops of blood before the

man's heart stopped beating. LaCroix picked up the corpse and dumped it in the closet. He shut the door and resumed watching Nicholas and Janette make love.

Nicholas had penetrated the female vampire and was now gently thrusting. Her legs were wrapped tightly around his hips, keeping him in close and tight.

LaCroix swiftly shed his clothes and boots. His cock half-erect, he began to milk it, rubbing the precum juice along its thick length. Trembling with anticipation, LaCroix returned to the bed and settled behind Nicholas.

Nicholas felt the bed dip under LaCroix's weight. He jumped as LaCroix's cool hands stroked his ass.

"Hold him, Janette!" LaCroix commanded sharply.

Janette pulled her legs tighter, hooking her ankles across Nicholas' back. She cupped his face, staring deep into his fiery eyes.

Between gasping breathes, she spoke.

"Look at me, *Nicholah*. Think of us, what we're doing. You feel so good in me, so big, so strong. I don't ever want to let you go."

"Like LaCroix," Nicholas said as LaCroix's finger penetrated his ass.

"Sometimes," Janette admitted, not offended. "And with moments like these, who could ever blame us for trying to keep you with us always?"

From over Nicholas' shoulders, LaCroix winked at Janette, mentally applauding her words.

Steadying Nicholas, LaCroix slowly eased his cock into the young vampire's body. It wasn't easy. He was tense and his passage was nearly dry, but LaCroix was patient, content to savor the conflicting feelings of pain and passion running through their blood-link.

Once completely sheathed, LaCroix pushed Janette's legs further to the side so he could rest against Nicholas' back. He petted his lover's sides, comforting and soothing him while at the same time heightening his passion. He reached down and fondled Nicholas' balls, running his thumb across the smooth, taunt skin. Curving his hand, LaCroix found the juncture where Nicholas and Janette's bodies joined.

He felt the slick juices there, part Janette, part Nicholas. Parting the lips of Janette's vagina, LaCroix pushed one finger along side Nicholas' shaft and entered her moist haven. The two vampires underneath LaCroix groaned in response. The extra stimulation pushed Nicholas closer to the edge and he resumed thrusting.

LaCroix removed his finger and placed both hands on Nicholas' hips. He started his own thrusting, matching stroke for stroke.

After a few hard thrusts, Nicholas climaxed, keening his pleasure with a soulful wail. When he collapsed on top of her, Janette bit into his shoulder, desperate for her lover's blood. Janette sucked greedily while watching her master's impassioned face above her. His thrusts into Nicholas were long and powerful, stimulating Janette as well.

LaCroix changed the rhythm of his thrusts, driving deeper into Nicholas' pliant body. Grunting and growling, he licked at the small rivulet of blood that seeped between Janette's lips and ran down Nicholas' shoulder. Seeing she was still with him, LaCroix reached between their bodies to further caress and excite her.

They came together, with Nicholas trapped between them. Janette smothered her cries as she bit harder and deeper into Nicholas' shoulder, then fell back into the pillows. LaCroix howled in ecstasy and frustration: it had been over a year since he'd possessed Nicholas so thoroughly and he didn't want it to end.

But it did end and all three vampires lay panting and entangled on the bed. Nicholas shifted restlessly.

"Am I crushing you?" he asked Janette.

"*Non*," she whispered, already falling into sated sleep. Nicholas smiled and kissed her parted lips.

When he heard Nicholas' voice, LaCroix carefully withdrew his cock and shifted off the younger vampire. Once free from his master's weight, Nicholas withdrew from Janette's body and tried to get out of the bed, but LaCroix stayed him.

"What are you afraid of, Nicholas?"

He allowed his master to draw him back. "I'm afraid for my soul."

LaCroix shook his head sadly. "Don't be afraid...vampires have no need of souls. It doesn't matter whether we're damned or not. We are eternal."

"You don't understand. I'm afraid for my human soul."

LaCroix pulled Nicholas to him and cuddled him. He couldn't bear to look at his child's face, so haunted by despair. If only he could crush the human soul, without destroying the spirit.

"It's you who doesn't understand. You'll have to accept that you are a vampire and no longer human. I didn't bring you across on a whim, Nicholas. I knew this journey would be difficult for you, but it's a good life, with so much to offer. And you have the strength to thrive in this life, Nicholas. There's no need for atonement...you're deluding yourself."

LaCroix kissed him on the forehead and on each eyelid. "Sleep now."

Nicholas sighed and settled down for the long day.

Though the sun rose higher in the sky, sleep didn't come to the master vampire for a long time. He knew Nicholas would flee again, search for a cure again. Nothing had been settled this night. Now LaCroix had plans to make, plans to make Nicholas accept his true nature, by force if necessary.

Tightening his grip on the younger vampire, Lacroix vowed he would keep Nicholas at his side -- forever.

**END**

# SHELTER IN THE NIGHT

## by Calvin Miller

"Live, Highlander... Grow stronger. Fight another day."

The words were as much a prayer as a plea. Duncan MacLeod stood in an underpass that bordered the Seine river in Paris. At the end of his sword stood a man who seemed no more than thirty, whose eyes were closed in preparation.

His name was Methos, the stuff of legends, even among immortals. His age was more than five thousand years. Even Methos himself could not remember the moment he'd been born, or when he'd become immortal, only the moment he'd taken his first head.

Methos - now known as Adam Pierson - had thought to fight his own battle against Kalas, a vain, sadistic immortal whose revenge against Duncan MacLeod had become a centuries long obsession.

Methos seemed self-assured this afternoon, prepared. But at this moment, he looked broken, his clothes soaked through, smelling of river water. His strong, handsome face bore a kind of fear MacLeod had never seen. For not long ago, without warning, Methos goaded Duncan into a fight.

Surprised, MacLeod fought to defend himself. However, Methos had not taken a head in nearly two hundred years and while the ancient immortal was good, his endurance was low. Methos struck out viciously, but without focus, his sword always just missing its mark. Then, in the heat of the battle, there was a sudden opening and the Highlander swung his sword, prepared for the kill.

Then stopped... his blade barely touched the ancient immortal's neck. Though he still held his sword, Methos stood perfectly still, his throat wide open, in perfect position for decapitation. Duncan felt a cold chill sweep through him.

*Something's wrong. What's happening here?*

"What are you waiting for, MacLeod?" Methos demanded, his eyes closed in preparation.

*My god, he wants to die! He set this up! He--* "No!" Duncan swung his sword, disarming Methos to keep him from beginning another battle.

"I'd have killed you!" Methos spat.

"No!" MacLeod countered, his frustration exploding. "You would have made a mistake and let me take your head!"

Methos' expression was painfully tired, but his dark eyes flashed. "You think I want to die? You think it's easier after thousands of years?"

Duncan blinked, confused. "Then why?"

"Because if you don't kill me, Kalas will."

MacLeod sighed. "Not if I get him first."

"And if you don't?" Methos drew closer. "I cannot beat him. I have tried. He will take my head and then he will have the strength to take yours."

*Great! Just great!* Irritated, Duncan threw up his arms. "So after 5000 years, your only solution is that I kill you?"

"He beat me," the ancient immortal defended. "He might beat you. He can't beat both of us."

*I can't believe we're discussing this!* Duncan paced a few steps back and forth. "If it's that simple, why don't you take my head?" he challenged in an attempt to snap Methos out of his need for suicide.

"Because it's not just a matter of who's the best fighter." Methos walked forward, his presence invaded MacLeod's space. "It's about passion...and hate." His eyes raked over Duncan. "I don't have the fire. You do. You want Kalas."

MacLeod was speechless. *He wants Kalas dead and he's willing to give up his long life to have make it happen.* He gazed into the dark eyes, sensing the hidden power beneath the unremarkable exterior. *Why?*

Methos took Duncan's hand, raising hand and sword together, positioning his own neck against the blade. "Live, Highlander," Methos commanded, releasing MacLeod's hand, closing his eyes. "Grow stronger," he continued. "Fight another day."

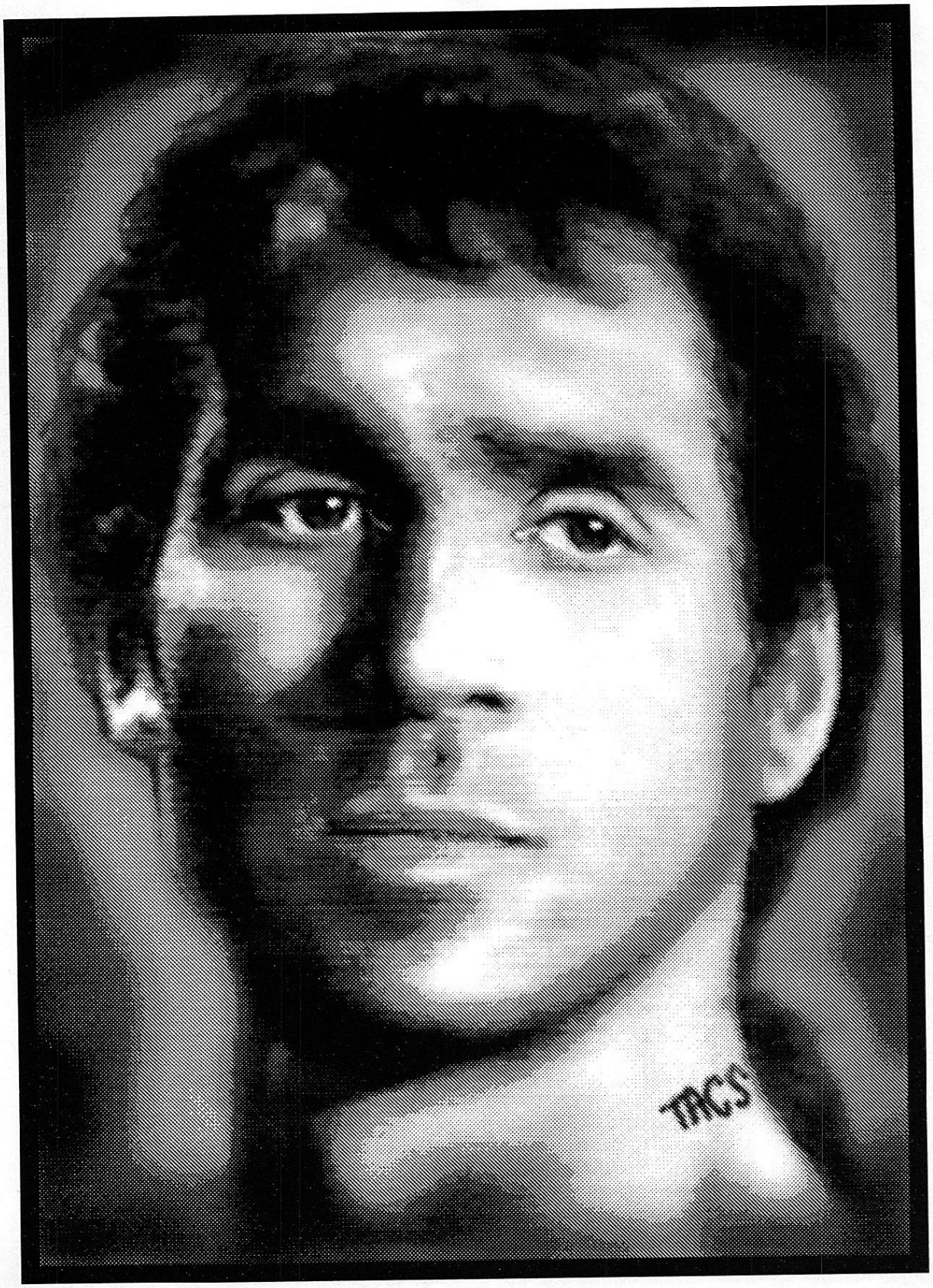
Frustrated, Duncan studied the man at the end of his sword once more. *He's a handsome man. a man with a purpose. He thinks this is the solution, but it's not. It's absurd.* He jerked the sword away. "Methos, I won't kill you."

"You're a fool!" Methos hissed, reaching to grab Duncan's sword hand once more, but the Highlander glided out of the way. "You could defeat Kalas! You could avenge Fitzcarin!"

"I won't kill you!" MacLeod sheathed his sword, ending the discussion. "I willna kill an innocent man to satisfy my own need for revenge!"

A cool breeze stirred between the two men as if the air itself sought to comfort them both. Duncan took one deep breath, then another. "Methos," he said more calmly.

The ancient immortal stood stiffly, his slight body shook as his chest heaved. His dark, cat-like eyes stared unseeing into the darkness beyond the opening of the small tunnel. Shock. Duncan approached Methos as if approaching a frightened animal. "Methos, it's over."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"What?" Methos blinked, his eyes moving from side to side. "Where's my sword?" he asked vaguely, as if lost.

"Here." Duncan picked the weapon up, handing it to Methos hilt first. "Are you all right?"

Methos took the weapon, then sheathed it in a hidden area of his coat. "I don't know how I feel, Duncan," he whispered.

"It's all right." Duncan put a comforting hand on Methos' shoulder. "I think I understand. But this isn't the way."

The ancient immortal sighed, then shook his head. "I don't know what else to do," he admitted.

"Come back to the barge with me," Duncan suggested. "We'll talk."

"No." Methos physically moved away. "I should go home."

"No." Duncan gripped Methos' arms, feeling them tense in resistance. *Kalas knows where to find him now. He could be watching right now, just beyond our ability to sense his presence. Methos can't be left alone until I take Kalas' head.*

"Kalas might be there, Methos. He could be anywhere in the city. Please come with me. Let me protect you."

Methos studied MacLeod closely for several seconds. The Highlander shivered in the scrutiny, his body reacting nervously. Earlier yesterday, Methos had rejected Duncan's offer of protection. He was admonished in a quiet parental tone that his offer to Methos was not only unwelcomed, but violated some rule that lay between immortals.

Now the oldest known immortal considered the words, and the source. Finally he nodded. "Let's go," he responded without emotion.

MacLeod sighed in relief, putting an arm around the thin shoulders as he guided his charge back to his home.

* * *

The ancient immortal was silent as they entered the barge. Duncan indicated the sofa in the living area, but Methos ignored him. "Are you hungry?" MacLeod offered, unwilling to be offended. "Methos? Or do you prefer Adam?"

"What's in a name?" Methos replied, his dark eyes scanning the eclectic interior. "I don't care," he finally answered.

Duncan sighed. "You shouldn't be in those wet clothes." He went to a trunk at the end of his bed then pulled out a terrycloth robe. "Here," he offered as he straightened and turned.

Methos looked at the garment with a frown. "You know. I won't die of pneumonia."

"Well, I don't want you dripping all over the place," MacLeod countered, keeping his voice calm and patient. "Why don't you use the shower?" he suggested. "I'll hang your clothes up to dry."

"Yes. All right." Methos gave in as he grabbed the robe. "Where's your shower."

"Up there," Duncan pointed, relieved the other man was taking some action. For a moment he considered following Methos, to be sure he could manage. Then he chided himself. *He's far from being a child. Let him have his time alone... as long as you know he's safe.*

Twenty minutes later, Methos emerged, wrapped in the terrycloth material. His posture was defeated, his expression uncertain as his dark eyes rested on Duncan. "You must think I'm a fool."

"No," MacLeod assured carefully. "Have a seat. This should be ready in a few minutes." He stood in the ship's galley, heating up canned soup, gathering bread and cheese for himself and his guest. Before his shower, Methos had politely refused to eat, but MacLeod hoped the aroma of food and gentle coaxing would convince him otherwise.

The ancient immortal said nothing more as he sat down at Duncan's computer, turning it on, silently accessing various internet connections. MacLeod wanted to say something more, to coax his friend out of the depression he could see surrounding the ancient immortal. But the questions died in his throat.

*I don't know him. What can I say that he won't cause him to leave, to put his life at risk again because of what... fear? Guilt? What can I do?*

*Give him a reason to live*. his inner voice advised.

*What reason could I give to a man who was ancient when Darius was born?* Duncan sighed, remembering the priest, his old friend, with a mixture of pleasure and grief. *On the other hand, there were times when Darius did this, a time when all immortals seem to feel an overwhelming depression, a lack of purpose. Many allowed themselves to die in battle, like Methos. Sometime we just need to know there's a reason to go on, that at least one person cared.*

*I am but a cold, empty candle without your flame, Duncan.* Darius' voice sang in his mind, reaching out from the past. *It is your passion which gives me meaning, my young friend. You're enjoyment is my ecstasy.*

Duncan hissed, jerking his hand. The soup had boiled over, spilling hot liquid onto his skin. Crying out in Gaelic, he instinctively raised his hand to his mouth then headed for the sink, soaking his hand in cold water, more for physical relief than any fear of permanent damage.

"Are you all right?"

Methos' voice was full of quiet concern. Duncan took a deep breath and briefly examined his hand. A red welt had already formed, threatening to blister. But as he watched, the wound grew less angry then faded into a faint pink color as his normal skin emerged untouched by burns.

"I'm all right," he assured as he reached for a towel.

"Here." Before Duncan could react, Methos enclosed MacLeod's hand in a towel he held, drying the skin with care. "I shut off the stove. Looks like quite a mess."

MacLeod sighed, looking over Methos' shoulder. The soup had erupted like a volcano over the entire surface of the stove. It would take hours to clean.

"I'm not hungry, Duncan. Honestly." Methos paused to examine the Highlander's hand. "There, not even a scratch."

MacLeod smiled, automatically pulling his hand back. To his surprise, however, Methos was not willing to let go. Duncan gazed into the dark eyes, becoming nervous when he observed an expressive glint in their depths. "Methos."

"I lied, you know." Methos said casually, continuing to rub the now dry hand. "I do hate Kalas, with a passion you can't imagine. He killed someone who had become very precious to me in a way I would not have done to my own worst enemy." His lips turned in a thin smile. "And I have had my share of those."

Donald Salzer. Duncan understood immediately. He suspected there was a closeness between them. Kalas had cut out the old book dealer's tongue and left him for dead. "You and he were lovers?"

"For nearly thirty years." A guilty smile came and went from his lips. "Christine, his wife, never knew... but she's never liked me."

Duncan raised his eyebrows in question. Sleeping with another's spouse was something he never knowingly did. Methos returned his gaze with some amusement.

"This wasn't a problem in my time," he defended lightly. Then his smile disappeared. "I loved Don, MacLeod. He was the first partner in centuries with whom I could simply grow old, sort of speak. He knew what I was and risked himself to save me."

Methos' expression never changed, his tone was casual, but Duncan sensed the anger, the utter loss. He reached out with his free hand to caress his companion's face. Deep emotions stirred within the Highlander. The need to protect and help began to take over.

"Methos, I'm sorry."

"Thank you." Wetness glistened in the immortal's eyes. Methos shivered, took a deep breath, then squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them, his eyes were dry and clear. "I haven't cried in centuries."

MacLeod's fingers skimmed over the older immortal's cheek. "What can I do?" he asked, already knowing the answer, already feeling the attraction flare between them.

Methos' gaze took on an intensity, dark eyes moved over MacLeod's face. "You are a beautiful man, Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod. You have a fatal flaw not many of us share anymore. You care, to the point of sacrifice. Even when you have doubts."

Still holding Duncan's hand within the towel, his other hand came up to finger the Highlander's dark hair. "I'm too old to play games," he said quietly. "Far too old to hint at what I want, MacLeod. You've only known me for a single day, yet you are willing to risk your young life for mine."

Ancient eyes glittered. "But tonight, I don't want risk. I want you."

Duncan swallowed, inhaling deeply as the delicate fingers moved from his hair to graze down the side of his neck in a seductive manner.

"I need to be with another immortal tonight, Duncan." Methos pressed closer to MacLeod. "An immortal I can trust with my life, and my soul." A wide grin appeared on the elder immortal's face. "Someone I know won't take my head in the afterglow."

The warmth of Methos' body stimulated Duncan. Cautiously, MacLeod continued his exploration of the ancient immortal's face. *He looks as though he was barely in his twenties when he died. Middle aged among his people back then, I suspect.* "I haven't been with a man in awhile," he warned. *Decades...*

"No?" Methos mirrored Duncan's caresses, his fingertips leaving trails of pleasure in their wake. "Not Joe?"

"Joe Dawson?" MacLeod drew back in shock. Joe? Not that the idea hadn't occurred to him. But... "Joe and I aren't...together. We're barely friends. I don't even know if he's attracted to men. And he's my Watcher. He's suppose to be watching me. But not like that."

Duncan glanced away, uncomfortable. The idea was scratching too many deep wounds. "Anyway... I don't think a relationship with a mortal is a good idea right now."

"Because of Tessa?" Methos sighed impatiently. He placed his hands on Duncan's shoulders, shaking him lightly.

"You can't live your life in fear of their deaths. It can't be helped. I've had hundreds of companions live and die at my side. It's never easy. Each one tears at your soul. But think of the gift of life they give you while you have them here with you! A unique gift to be cherished and protected."

Words of wisdom from a man who would know better than anyone. Duncan sighed. "I don't want to think about it now. There was someone else, after Tessa. I thought I was ready...but I was wrong. I couldn't even tell her what I was," he said tersely.

Methos sighed, then smiled.

"Don't let the opportunity pass you, Highlander. Joe is a powerful man who has already risked his career, his very life for you. And you wouldn't be the first immortal to form a relationship with his or her Watcher. All I ask is that you keep an open mind."

MacLeod nodded reluctantly, putting the thought aside. *Later.* His hands slid over the firm, hairless chest that peeked through the robe. In the pit of his stomach, in his chest, Duncan could feel the first hint of energy building between them, an energy that always existed when immortals became intimate.

But this feeling was stonger than MacLeod had ever felt before, stronger than the bond he shared with Darius. Nervously, the Highlander's fingers fell to the terry cloth belt around Methos' waist. *What's happening? What's going to happen when--*

"What are you thinking, Duncan?" Methos asked softly. His hands cupped the taller man's face, pulling it forward into an undemanding kiss. "I don't want to feel like I'm forcing you, my friend."

Friend? Duncan was warmed by the thought. "I want this," he replied without hesitation. He opened his companion's robe, impressed by the lean torso, taking time to appreciate aroused cock between the ancient immortal's legs. *I have the feeling he's been with more men than I can imagine in my lifetime. What can I offer that would satisfy him?*

"Duncan." Methos wrapped his arms around MacLeod's neck. His fingers worked at the clip holding back MacLeod's dark wavy hair, setting it free. "Such beautiful hair," he whispered in admiration.

MacLeod sighed, his mind responding to the seductive comment. The bond between them grew stonger, surrounding them gently. Duncan dipped his head, capturing his lover's lips in a deep, thoughtful kiss.

The taste was... male. The scent was intoxicating. Duncan groaned, his hands wandered over the lean shoulders, pushing back the robe until it fell. Then he reach down, his fingers just brushing Methos' cock.

"Ah, not so fast, Highlander," Methos chided, drawing back. His eyes twinkled with amusement. "You're not dressed for this," he chided. He took Duncan's hand. "Come on."

Like a novice, MacLeod was lead to his own king sized bed. He reached for the buttons of his shirt, but Methos slapped his hands. "Do nothing."

"But," MacLeod protested. *I'm suppose to be doing this to you...*

"Hush," Methos whispered sharply, his odd accent lending an alien quality to his voice. "I want my pleasure of you... your pleasure." The ancient immortal stripped off Duncan's shirt, then opened the fly of his pants. "Just as I hoped,"

Methos purred as his hand carefully cupped the area of the Scot's briefs where it encased the Highlander's thickening cock.

MacLeod hissed in reaction to the touch, his nerves vibrated. Methos laughed, moving quickly to finish undressing the younger immortal, pushing the Highlander down on the bed to remove the boots and socks. "So many clothes, Duncan," Methos began dryly. "In my day, it just wasn't this complicated."

"Think of the challenge, Methos," Duncan replied with a smile. He pulled himself back on the bed, making room. Methos followed, his lips locking onto MacLeod's. His hands skimmed over the Scot's well-muscled torso.

"You have been a challenge ever since the day you became immortal, Duncan MacLeod." Methos teased the nipples on the Scotsman's chest with his hands and tongue, then began moving downward. "Your first Watcher felt you wouldn't survive your first fight, even with Connor's help."

His hand wrapped around the Highlander's erect organ, milking gently. "I'm glad he was wrong."

Duncan could not reply. Methos' hands were everywhere, touching and probing, moving with greater need in response to sounds of pleasure from the Highlander. MacLeod arched his hips as the older immortal's lips reached the base of his cock. "No..." *This is suppose to be for you.*

"Relax, MacLeod," Methos ordered, his tone husky with need. "Your young pleasure is mine. Let yourself go." Warm lips slid over the cock, then away. "I will teach you something about yourself which might save your life."

MacLeod tried to resist the pleasures driving through him, unwilling to simply receive in this encounter. But the presence of Methos grew stronger, his touches enthralling. Helpless, Duncan cried out as the elder immortal's mouth enveloped his organ eagerly, teeth and tongue doing what he'd never experienced before in all the centuries of his life. MacLeod tensed, pumping into the ancient mouth, driven by the passion.

Then the mouth was gone. For a single moment, the pain of its absence left MacLeod in shock. "So smooth," Methos whispered, his nails lightly scratching Duncan's chest. Captured, MacLeod could only groan. His eyes slit open to watch as the elder immortal rose to straddle him, an enigmatic expression on his face.

In one smooth motion, Duncan found his cock enclosed in Methos' warm body. Duncan hissed, then moaned. Almost against his will, his body responded, pumping into Methos.

"Oh, yes, my friend," the ancient immortal whispered in pure pleasure. "I enjoy this position most of all." Methos moved slowly, up and down. "Here it begins, Highlander. Enjoy it."

*What begins... ohhh* The Highlander groaned, then cried out. With a show of superior knowledge, Methos continued to stimulate Duncan, the muscles within his body milking the welcomed rod. MacLeod closed his eyes, pushing himself further into Methos, setting a rhythm that the ancient immortal matched, stroke for stroke.

Then he felt it, the building of energy. Most of the time, it was a mild encounter of quickenings, pleasant stimulation that enhanced the moment. With Darius, the energy had been a little stronger, making sex between them memorable. But this was nothing MacLeod had ever experienced before in his life.

The quickening built around them quickly. Duncan cried out, fear filling him as he recognized the feeling. The moment after a head was taken, before the final transfer of power.

*He's taken his head! My god, I'm making love to a dead man...*

"Shhhh..." Gentle hands caressed Duncan's hair, brushing it from his eyes. "I'm here." Lips brushed his chest in reassurance. "This is a special talent I've learned over thousands of years... transferring a little of my quickening to others, even sensitive mortals."

Methos suddenly increased his rhythm, pushing the Highlander further towards release. "Live, Highlander," Methos whispered in the storm of power. "Take me into yourself. It's your only hope to defeat Kalas."

Duncan was helpless to understand, or resist. He pumped into Methos without mercy. A steady stream of energy surged into his mind, his being. Then the pain and pleasure peaked. Duncan's cock exploded into Methos. The ancient immortal cried out as well and MacLeod felt the warm moisture flow onto his chest.

Then the Highlander fainted.

* * *

It was a feeling, a need. Duncan opened his eyes. It was early morning, a little more than an hour before sunrise. MacLeod moaned, then stretched his body. He felt wonderful, full of energy. What---

"Methos?" Duncan sat up. The interior of his barge was dark and quiet. "Methos!" MacLeod got out of the bed and made his way to the center of his living area to switch on a light. "Methos!"

Silence. MacLeod scanned the room. Methos' clothes, carefully hung to dry, were gone along with their owner. *He left. God... where!*

Then he saw it. A note on the bed. With a sigh, he snatched it up, sitting down on the bed as he opened it.

Highlander:

I'm sorry. I'm not usually the "kiss 'em and leave 'em" type. But just like you, I have things to do before this battle is done. I would have tried to keep you from facing Kalas in battle, but I know your mind is set. So I have given you a small gift that should confuse him enough to give you an advantage. This is assuming you keep him quessing about whether you've actually taken my head.

MacLeod, you saved my life last night. I will not forget it. And we will see each other again. Remember what I said about Joe Dawson. I would not steal him away from you before giving you a fighting chance.

Live Highlander. Grow strong. Fight another day...

I will wait.

Duncan took a moment to read the letter again, to absorb the words, to admire the delicate handwriting. Then he carefully folded the note away. This morning he had purpose to do battle with Kalas. And he had a secret weapon.

*Kalas is probably at Methos' place. I hope Methos hasn't tried to go back this morning.*

Duncan quickly dressed and donned the coat that hid his sword. As he came up to the deck of the barge, the sun began to brighten the Parisian sky.

Today was a good day to fight.

# SHUTTING DOORS

by

## James Kythe Walkswithwind

I stared down at the street. It looked like a stream of water, or like a microscope vision of blood vessels rushing through the veins. It looked busy, even from this great a height. I felt myself leaning forward, unintentionally, towards that great rush of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, feeling myself reaching towards it, responding to the pull that was more than gravity, more than the swirling motions of the life below. It was the pull that always called to me when I soared.

I glanced upwards, into the sky, wondering where the bar was that I didn't realized I had expected to see. The bar that had always allowed me to defy that pull towards the earth. It wasn't there, of course. It hadn't been there in a long, long time. It had been replaced, as much as something like that could be replaced, with the wide black wings I kept tucked around my body.

These wings, they didn't understand. They held me up and let me fall with grace, speed and control. They swelled out into the night and created the illusion of magic or supernatural skills, or whatever it was the people saw when they looked up from their ground and saw me coming. These wings let me sail gently through the winds, through the air, through whatever I found myself in, sail slowly, falling to the ground.

The bar had never let me fall, it had always held me up, strong and firm. Bruce told me that I had learned to do so much more than I had ever been taught to do; not long ago he had remarked that I had grown into a fine young man. He said I should be proud of the person I was becoming.

He didn't understand. These wings, it wasn't really flying. He thought it was, he said that everything I had inside me could send me soaring into the sky, into the future. As I leaned closer to the massed whirl of traffic below, I knew he couldn't understand. What is a slow fall, to one who has soared upwards, flung himself through the air, never falling, knowing he would never, ever descend farther than the reach of a bar, the reach of a hand? Knowing he had the entire atmosphere to play in, live in, revel in.. What is falling, to such a one? I had been taught to avoid falling, no matter how beautiful it may appear, with black wings spread out from your back.

I saw the ground below, pulling at me. It always did, always had called to me in that sometimes sweet, sometimes taunting voice, that it would grab me and I could never defy it. And from the time I was four, I had been defying it. I wanted to leap, as my training bade me, in response to that call. Leap out, flying, truly flying and grab that bar.

I leapt.

There was no bar.

**********

"Where have you been?"

I barely glanced up. Bruce didn't sound like he was angry or anything, simply curious. It wasn't like he had any reason to be upset - I didn't have a curfew. Hell, I was nearly 18. "Just out."

Bruce looked over, he was sitting at his desk, either going over more paperwork or some other curious aspect of his role as businessman. It was the only time he used that desk. "I found your beeper in the den."

I sighed to myself. I didn't have to look at him to see that accusatory expression on his face. "I forgot. I'm sorry. But it isn't like I wouldn't have seen the signal, if-"

"That isn't the point, Dick. True, if the Commissioner needed us you'd have known. But that's not the only time we're needed. I asked you-"

"To wear the beeper. I know, I know. I'm sorry. I wont leave it behind again." I walked over and held out my hand; Bruce gave me a second appraising look, trying to decide if I was sincere, or something. Then he gave me the stupid beeper and didn't say anything else. I clipped it to my belt, so he could see me doing it and left the room. Once I got to my own bedroom I slipped my jeans off and put on sweats. I kicked my shoes into a corner and wondered what the hell I was going to do now.

It was late and I wasn't tired at all. Besides, I was used to staying up till nearly 2 in the morning and sleeping late. That's what I had done, until Bruce discovered that before he could arrange to send me off to college, I had to have a legitimate high school diploma. I'd argued with him for hours, days about it. My parents had tutored me and my brother, as had Matt and Jenny and several other of the circus people. Maybe they weren't an accredited educational institution but they cared and I learned a lot of things. I remembered yelling that exact phrase at Bruce, right before he'd told me I was wasting my time because he had already made arrangements and as long as he was responsible for me, I was going to get my diploma.

I stared at my walls. Sometimes they inspired me, sparked a bit of interest in me for a task to occupy my time for an hour, or several. Sometimes I ended up staring at my walls for hours searching for something to do. Something to fill my time, my mind. Usually I headed down to the gym, when all else failed. But not tonight. I didn't want to see the gym, see it full of every piece of equipment a multi-billionaire with an interest in staying in shape could find. I had never told him there was a piece missing.

It wouldn't have made any difference, anyway, because flying alone just wasn't.. wasn't the point. It wasn't really flying. You had to have someone else in the air with you, either just to get the second bar swinging or to help fling you into the air or to catch you before you came down.

Whenever we sailed through the air in our bat-caped wings, I never felt more than a ripple of air from the fall of the person beside me. Never felt that reaching out, that straining, that certainty that someone would be holding out a hand to catch me, to reach out for me to catch them. We always flew alone when we flew in those wings. If you could call it flying.

I fell back on my bed and stared at the ceiling. Still nothing was coming to mind. I could read, listen to some music, log onto the net or simply stare. I hated this feeling. I felt so.. so something. Useless. What was there to do, that would be worth my while to do? It wasn't like...I had any plans.

Back in the circus, I had never questioned what I did. It didn't matter so much whether we had an audience, because flying was the best end in itself. I would have flown had no one ever

been there to see. It was part of my nature, I told my brother in those times we talked about whether we'd ever pull up and leave the circus and create new lives for ourselves. He sometimes wanted to do something else, but he never really knew what. I never wanted to be anything else but a bird.

I rolled over, pulling the blankets around me, ignoring my shoes, my lights still on, my teeth unbrushed and all those little going to bed rituals adults said were so important. I closed my eyes and tried to recapture the sensation of flying, so I could sleep.

**********

I got through the rest of the weekend without too much trouble. I had homework to distract me which gave me an excuse to sit at my desk and stare out the window for hours on end, without anyone bugging me. The view from that window never seemed to change. I wasn't used to seeing the same thing, day after day, out there past the boundaries of my home. Even though the circus followed the same circuit over a five year period, the views had never looked the same. The towns and cities always changed, flickering like the frames in a movie, held together by the reassuring solidity of the bright tents and trailers and people who created my home.

Sunday night I had figured out what was wrong. Well, one of two things really. The first was that the circus was coming through Gotham City again the next month. The second was, well, something I hadn't figured out how to deal with and wasn't too crazy about learning. I threw my books in my backpack, still somewhat disbelieving that tomorrow morning I would look and act like any other high school senior on the planet. Sometimes I loved being so normal; sometimes I hated it.

But right now that wasn't my problem. I went downstairs, looking for Bruce. I found him in the study working on one of his crosswords from hell. He smiled when I walked in and waved me over. He was always trying to get me to help - I could never convince him I didn't like crossword puzzles. I liked puzzles I could reason out the answer to or simply find the answers hidden someplace in the puzzle itself.

I stayed standing on the other side of the desk, suddenly feeling like an eight year old boy. I stared down at the desktop, at the dark grained wood polished by caring hands for more than two hundred years. I wondered what I was going to say, how I was going to say it.

"Dick?" I heard Bruce set his pencil down and push away from the desk. "What's wrong?"

Before I could say anything coherent, I started crying. Bruce was out of his chair and around the desk in a flash and I found myself in his arms, crying into his chest. He didn't say anything for awhile, he just held onto me. I felt like I used to, when my dad would hold me.. when he would reach out his hand and catch me, flying through the air.

When I stopped crying, I heard Bruce ask in a very soft voice, "Is it about the circus, coming next month?"

I nodded, still unsure of what to say. I didn't know if I wanted to stay away from it or spend the entire three days with them while they were here. I didn't know what I wanted, but I knew I needed something.

Bruce didn't say anything else; he waited until I moved away, before he let go of me. I waited a while, before I moved away. When I did, I sat down in the thick brown chair by the fireplace and tried to look up at him.

"I don't.."

Bruce crouched beside the chair. "I understand, Dick. I.. I know how hard it can be."

I turned my head towards him, letting my face ask the 'how' 'why' and all those other questions I'd never asked him about his own parents' death.

Bruce looked away, then told me. "Every year...I visit the theater where they were murdered. I lay two roses there, to...remember them by, sometimes.. when I have to go by that alley. At other times, I.. feel like I can't do it Like I can't go in there, can't bear to look at the place where they died. But sometimes I have to. And it always hurts...it always hurts like hell."

I could tell that right now he was hurting almost as much as I was and for some weird reason it made me feel better. Not that he was hurt, but that I wasn't the only one. "How...how do you...how can you go back there?"

He sighed and seemed to look for the answer, as if he'd never asked himself the question before; or had asked it a thousand times and never found the answer. "Because I have to. Because otherwise it would be like forgetting them. When it isn't...that night, when I have to go through that alley, I tell myself that its just another alley. That everything and everyone has moved on and that their ghosts aren't waiting for me down there."

"Does that work?"

He almost smiled. "Not really. But I found out that it's because I carry their ghosts inside me, all the time. The alley...doesn't really matter. Going into that alley doesn't make them haunt me...they always haunt me." He didn't sound...quite as haunted as his words made out. It was like he was kinda glad they were haunting him.

"Sounds like a good reason to lock yourself in your bedroom for a few years."

He laughed. "I have definitely thought about it. But...something always draws me back."

"Al."

Grinning, he nodded. "Sometimes. Sometimes it's just...knowing how much I have to do...how much I want to do. And I do have too much to do, to spend my time hiding under my blankets behind locked doors."

I didn't say anything for a moment. How did he know that was exactly what I wanted to do?

Bruce glanced over at me. "Dick.. if you want to go, when the circus comes to town, let me know. If you don't, that's all right. You don't have to-"

"I.. I think I will. But...I'm probably going to change my mind a hundred times before it gets here. I'll...let you know." He nodded and stood up.

"I understand." For a moment he just stood there and looked down at me. I felt myself, all curled in the chair, like a little kid again. Well, not quite- but what I did feel like was something I didn't want to think about. "If you want to talk about it again, I'm always here."

"I know." I was pleased to find I *did* feel better. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now, why don't you go on to bed? I'll send Alfred up with some hot chocolate, to help you sleep."

I smiled. I had never told Bruce about my pre-bed hot chocolates, but apparently Al had. Either that or Bruce simply noticed that they had been going through a lot more hot chocolate mix since I'd moved in. It felt nice, that he'd noticed. I pushed myself out of the chair and headed for the door. Before I got there, I stopped and turned around, Bruce was sitting back down at his desk. He looked up, curious.

I stared for a moment, then quickly stammered, "Good night."

He smiled. "Good night, Dick."

I turned and headed upstairs to bed, trying not to wonder what my dreams would be like. After drinking my hot chocolate, I lay down to find out.

**********

Monday was, well, typical. School. Walking the halls with my backpack slung over my shoulder, watching people walking here and there, filling up the corridors with sounds and motions and energy and everything else teenagers are full of. I went to my locker, emptied my pack and grabbed my English book. I had tried telling Bruce I didn't need this, I still wished he'd let me take the GED and be done with it. But he'd insisted on my actually taking a year of high school.

And, though I wouldn't tell him unless the Penguin himself had me dangling upside down over a vat of acid, he had been right. I knew a lot of stuff...but the things I knew didn't always translate into what high school thought I should know. I was way behind the other students in English, and math. I was way ahead, though, in history and most of the social sciences. The first was Old Gregor's fault, he was a history buff - had a story for each one of the thousand tattoos he had on his body. He was always happy to tell them and with such a vivid reminder of the stories he told, I'd learned and remembered a lot of history. The second was my mom - she was always taking me to the museums when I was a kid, the science museums and planetariums and all that. I soaked it up like a sponge, not just because it had delighted my mother.

The first month of school I'd tried to hide just how well I was - and was not, doing from Bruce. But apparently the school sent home reports and the first time I'd failed an English test he'd shown up with a tray of snacks and a firm warning that I couldn't leave the chair until I'd read the *entire* book I'd been assigned. He'd even left Robin home, when the Commissioner sent the signal into the sky.

The book had been OK.

Today I wasn't worried about English. Not that I didn't have a reason to be - Mrs. Matthews had a tendency to give us pop quizzes, when she thought we weren't keeping up with our reading. It wasn't that I had read the chapters, but just that I had so much on my mind.

I did manage to survive until swim practice. I was on the swim team partly because it was an easy way to spend an hour of school doing something athletic and partly because I'd never done much swimming before. I certainly wasn't going to join the gymnastics team. No way.

I thought back to the first day of school, when the coach had put us all through our paces, in order to fill out those little forms the government gave the schools to make sure their next generation wasn't too lazy and slow. Thirty of us guys had been standing around the gym, all wear-

ing identical shorts and T-shirts, muttering comments ranging from 'why the hell do we have to do this' to 'I bet I can do more pushups than you can'.

I hadn't known a soul and had been standing off to the side, trying not to feel nervous or conspicuous. That didn't last, when the first thing we did was run laps, timing our half-mile. I didn't out run everyone, but I can darn close. I did beat out everyone on the pushups, though.

The next day we'd done more tests and by that time, a lot of guys knew my name. Sit-ups, standing jumps, stretches...all those things that I had been doing all my life, in one form or another. It wasn't until the last day, though, that I made my mark. It wasn't even my fault..

The coach took us into the gym, like every day before and I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw it. So far no one had really made the connection of *who* I was. Or at least they hadn't said anything, if they had. But today it was going to change, I could just tell. The gym was decked out in a variety of things...all gymnasium equipment. I didn't know whether to grin or groan. I settled for staying quiet, as the coach had us line up.

The first was a balance beam. All we had to do was walk down it, one after another. See if we had any balance at all. Luckily there was a guy right ahead and behind me, so I couldn't be tempted to do a flip or walk down it on my hands. Then it got fun. Next up was the rings. The coach said all we had to do was pull ourselves up. Davy asked if we could do anything *more* than that; I got the feeling Davy was being a smart aleck. When he pulled himself up easily and swung his legs up into a pike, I knew he was.

When my turn came, I pulled up and swung into a handstand. I held it then simply dropped. Davy gave me a high-five and that was the first time I felt like I was going to have friends, here. Next we went over the horse - both Davy and I turned a flip over it.

Then we got to the bars. Coach said we had to pull ourselves up, again. By this time I'd realized that all the guys here could do at least the minimum asked. And some could do more. Davy, however, was a gymnast and I was.. well, I was a lot of things. All of which lead me to believe I could get away with a little.. showing off. I watched as Davy pulled himself up and spun once around the bar. When it was my turn, I jumped up and grabbed the bar, pulled my legs forward and swung around the bar the opposite direction that Davy had. I got into a handstand on the bar and held it. And held it. And held it.

When the guys starting laughing, coach told me to come on down and stop fooling around. Davy gave me another high-five and the coach told us that we should take this a little more seriously, since the worst was yet to come. I had been worried for almost a minute when I saw what the next was.

The rope. I wanted to start laughing. The coach timed everyone on their climb up; some guys didn't make it all the way but that was expected, or so Davy said. The coach left Davy and I for last, then told us to take the rope. I grinned at Davy, then when the whistle blew, I paused for a second. Davy was squirreling up the rope, legs wrapped around it and arms pulling fast. Before the coach could yell at me, I had the rope in my hand and was climbing...legs out in front of me, beside the rope. I gained and passed Davy in seven feet. I beat him to the top and hung there...and decided to indulge a desire or a need, that had gone unfulfilled for a long time.

I wrapped my leg around the rope and let myself fall. I played on the rope for several minutes, going through all the things I'd done playing and working on the rope for fifteen years. The coach was glaring at me by the time I'd gotten to the ground. He tried yelling about playing dangerous games and what if Id fallen and all those things people say when they have never learned to fly.

I just shrugged and told him I'd been doing that since I was three. He still glared, but didn't say anything. That's not to say I didn't get an earful when I got home. Bruce had been pissed.

What all of that meant, now, was that when I got to swim practice Davy pulled me to the side and began filling me in on the weekend gossip, because now we had become really good friends.

Even if he could beat me, swimming laps.

**********

When school was over for the day, I found myself standing by my locker, putting books in my pack. I was hit by a sudden feeling hat this was all wrong, that none of this should be happening, that I should be somewhere else, doing something else. I should not be here, acting like Dick Grayson, high school student. I should be someplace, high above the world, wings stretched out to touch the stars. I should be wrapped in green and crimson, snug in the familiarity of a world I'd always known and never dreamed would lose. I shouldn't be thinking of Wuthering Heights but living them.

I slung my back pack over my shoulder and strode out of the building, searching for something to remind myself of who I was and who I was supposed to be. Before I got to my bike, Davy found me.

"Hey, Dick.. can I cadge a ride?"

For a moment I only stared at him, not quite sure I'd heard or understood the words. Then I nodded slowly, I had given Davy rides home from school often enough that Bruce had gotten him a helmet of his own. Davy gave me a weird look, though and didn't move towards the bike. "Dick, are you OK?"

"Yeah," I was surprised to hear my voice sounded normal. "I've just got...stuff on my mind." I wasn't too sure I wanted to tell Davy about my family, about the circus coming to town, about how much I felt out of place and out of sorts. How I felt like I had been transplanted into a pot I had no business being in. I climbed onto my bike and waited for Davy to climb on behind me.

"Hey, instead of heading home, why don't we head out to the park?" Davy's suggestion wasn't surprising, he made it at least once a week. I nodded and turned the engine on. I liked the park and I enjoyed our trips there. I didn't really know why, I'd never been much of a nature person. But something about it and about being there with Davy, made it wonderful. Sometimes I hated having to lie to him about most of my life.

I pulled into traffic and headed down the road. For a moment I had a vision of the road, from the tops of the buildings, that I had seen the other night. Then it cleared and I saw it all from the ground, from the seat of my bike. It wasn't quite flying, but the wind felt the same. I leaned into it and may have sped some getting to the park.

Davy walked away from the bike, heading for the trees and pond he enjoyed. I locked everything up and followed him more slowly. I had a feeling I was going to have some quiet time here, which would lead to thinking about things I didn't want to know. I watched the ground under my feet as I walked after Davy. I heard him say something to himself, or to the trees, or something. I looked up and found him smiling at the world around him.

Why was he in such a good mood? I didn't say it, though, and fell into a sitting position under the trees, surrounded by trees and bushes and flowers. I felt so calm, I figured I would start crying again. I heard Davy sit down beside me, then his hand was resting on my arm.

"What's wrong, Dick?"

It wasn't any easier to figure out what to say. I shook my head, staring at the jumble of things that presented themselves, things I needed to say, to understand. I rested my head in my hands, staring at the individual blades of grass and wondering how they could possibly be happy stuck here in the mud.

Finally I said, "My...my parents, my brother...I keep thinking about them. The circus...it's coming back here next month. I keep thinking...wondering if I want to see everyone again.."

Davy didn't say anything. He knew the whole story - well, half of the whole story, about my family. He did put his arm over my shoulders and sat quietly beside me. When I began crying again, I decided I needed to say the rest of it, to *someone*.

"I keep thinking about how right my life seemed, with them, in the circus. Everything was just like I wanted. I loved my life, what I did. It wasn't...anything like a normal life. But it was exactly what I wanted. Now I find myself in a completely different life, trying to be a normal guy and all I feel is that I had to give up everything I loved. I used to fly, Davy. And now I can barely walk."

There was nothing, at first, but the sound of the birds around us. I felt an angry stab, that these ducks and geese should be here to remind me that there will always be those who can still fly. Their calls to each other taunted me, telling me I had no business flying, no reason to miss what shouldn't have been mine, human as I was. Then Davy was whispering how sorry he was, and holding me against his shoulder. I left the words alone and let myself cry.

I was beginning to think I wasn't going to be able to do anything else and it hurt just as badly as it had the night they died. It wasn't fair, it wasn't...that I'd had to lose everything I'd loved. Everyone I'd loved. I wanted to scream out, yell that it was all Bruce's fault, because it was still because of him that Two-face had done it all..

And that reminded me that I wasn't the only one who had lost everything. It didn't stop me from crying, but I didn't yell. He didn't need me blaming him, on top of everything else.

I didn't realize I'd stopped crying until Davy spoke. "Are you gonna be OK?" He sounded like he hadn't a clue how to help. He also sounded like he desperately wanted to do something, anyway.

"I.. I think so." I didn't feel it, not really, but I had a feeling I would be OK. Eventually. I stayed where I was, though, with Davy's arm wrapped around me. And I remembered I had something else to deal with.

I didn't have to try to figure out how, though, because Davy did it for me. When I had calmed down and stopped crying and sniffling, he leaned back a little and looked at me. I knew that look, I had been seeing it a lot in the last month or so. And I'd even figured out what it meant. I felt my stomach tightening and wondered how I was going to get out of it.

Davy brushed my face with his fingers and when I didn't move, didn't react, he leaned forward. I don't know why I let him, maybe I was just so happy he was there, maybe because he

was my friend- one of my only friends. Maybe because I wanted to know how it felt. But I let him kiss me, without pulling away.

But I guess he read my face well enough, when he leaned back. He looked so disappointed, I wanted to hold him in *my* arms and tell him it wasn't true. He frowned and asked glumly, "Why did you let me, then?"

"I'm.. I'm sorry. Davy, it isn't..."

He shrugged and started to stand up. I grabbed his arm and held him next to me. "Look, Dick. I know you think we'd better talk this out and get things.. straightened out. But not right now, OK?"

He sounded miserable. Almost the way I felt.. I kept a hold of his arm. "Davy, would you listen to me for a minute before you run off? It isn't... I didn't..." It was frustrating, trying to explain something to him that I hadn't yet explained to myself. "It isn't that I don't want to. It's just...there's somebody I want to do it with and I don't even know...if he would."

I was almost as surprised at my words as Davy looked. He stared at me for a moment, then nodded. "I know exactly how you feel."

I smiled, then I started laughing. "Yeah, I guess you do.." He started laughing, too, and I was glad because it meant we hadn't ruined our friendship in spite of a double case of unrequited love.

He put his arm back around me and I leaned against him as he leaned against a tree. "So.. you going to tell me who?" His voice was light, but my heart froze at the question.

"I don't think.."

His hand on my arm was the only reply I got. Down by the pond the ducks were still calling to each other, but their tone had changed. It almost sounded like they weren't making fun of me anymore.

**********

I slammed the door behind me, but not on purpose. The wind had caught it as I pushed it shut and the resounding slam echoed through the house. *All* the way through the house. I looked up sheepishly when Alfred peered over the stair railing at me. "Oops.." He just laughed and went back to whatever it was he was doing. I headed for my room to shuck my stuff and get on with having the whole evening off.

No homework. At least, none Bruce would know about. I sometimes felt *really* silly, trying to hide my homework assignments from him. I mean, here we were, two crime fighters who went through all kinds of crap together, saving the world and the city and damsels in distress. And I was sneaking around like a school kid, hiding report cards and tests from him. It occurred to me that if any of our usual nemesis wanted to get the upper hand he or she could just send my report card home before I had a chance to look over it.

Not that I'd ever changed it. I wouldn't do that. But I *did* need time to come up with some story to explain my grades in English and math.

I left my pack on the bed and changed into my workout clothes. I *really* needed to beat something up tonight. I didn't see Bruce or Al again, on my way to the gym. Just as well. I

wanted to get myself under control before I saw them at supper. Because I kept thinking back to Davy's kiss. Kept thinking about how nice it was and how great it would be to kiss someone else..

I stopped, along the way to the gym, to pound my head against the wall. I honestly didn't know why I felt this way, but I knew I'd better stop soon. Otherwise I would drive myself nuts. Luckily a good long workout usually had the effect of clearing my mind and exhausting me until I sleep so soundly I didn't dream.

The gym looked huge, as always, large enough to play a full game of basketball in. The high walls stretched up, windows surrounding the ceiling bringing the light in. I felt a tightening in my throat- it was big enough to hang a couple trapezes in. I brought my eyes down to the ground level and left the thought unvoiced, as always. I had never asked and was never going to. Besides, who did I have to fly with?

The words had been repeated in my brain so many times I didn't even notice as I thought them again. No one to fly with. I settled into the first of my stretches, trying to focus my thoughts on my breathing, on relaxing, on feeling my body move the way it was supposed to.

Except it was supposed to be up there.. I kept looking upwards, as I went though my warm-ups and exercises. Everytime I realized what I was doing, I wrenched my gaze down again, but before long I would find myself gazing up again, seeing something in the rafters that wasn't there. If I closed my eyes I could almost hear the whisper of the ropes, the slight squeaking motion as the bar swung free, both of them calling to my soul and asking me why I was standing there on the ground when I belonged in the sky. I stopped halfway through my Long Form and listened to them call me, ask me why I had left them, ask me to come home..

"Leave me alone!!!!"

I hadn't realized I'd yelled it aloud until I opened my eyes and heard the reverberations of my voice off of the walls. I turned around in a circle, looking around me for something - I didn't know what. I suddenly knew I couldn't stay where I was, not in this room which only reminded me I couldn't have what I needed. I heard someone cry out as I ran from the room.

I ran from the house, the gym opened up to the side of the yard, the side that lead off into the woods. I didn't stop running as I hit the treeline, instead I settled myself into a long, hard run going just as damn fast as I could. My attention was focused on the woods directly in front of me, leading me around the trunks and ducking under the branches. I was quick and began to enjoy the sensation of moving at top speed and still dodging, weaving and floating around the trees and other obstacles of my flight. I never slowed down and my heart began beating hard and fast, carrying me along as I ran. I knew I could run forever, right then.

The woods were dark, not so dark I couldn't see but dark enough to hide everything that might have been beyond the woods. I couldn't see the sky, nor even much sign of the sun. Patches here and there passing in a flash as I sped by. I didn't know how far I'd gone and I didn't care. I was running, not away and not towards, only running, using my entire body to propel myself onwards, forwards, into the air as if the sky was waiting for me someplace ahead, ready to catch me when I flung myself away from the ground.

For now I ran. Each step I ran, for a moment I was airborne, both feet off the ground, moving forward with a speed only birds could achieve. I knew I would be crying if I had the energy to spare.. or maybe I was and I hadn't noticed. I could still see, so it didn't matter. The trees kept opening a way for me to go, so on I went.

I wasn't sure how or why I fell, but suddenly I was laying on my side, on the ground. I lay there, panting for air, and let my surroundings form into something recognizable. When I realized where I was, I felt something inside me gibber. I crawled forward to peer over the cliff, down at the water almost half a mile below.

I was very, very glad I'd fallen. "Oh shit.." I shook my head and leaned back, laying on the patch of grass and stared up at the darkening sky. I wondered how I'd known to stop and remembered a sudden flash and pull at my ankle. I looked over and saw it, floating in the air beside me, its single camera lens staring at me accusingly.

I knew on the other side of that camera Bruce was sitting at the control panel in the cave, either swearing at me or glaring, or both. He'd used the remote camera that usually kept guards around the grounds to follow me, keep an eye on me. I felt myself getting royally pissed that he'd spied on me.. then I ducked my head and said aloud, "Thanks."

I didn't want to hear the lecture I would get when I got home.

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After enjoying lying perfectly still listening to my heart pound from running and the adrenaline of seeing the cliff appear before me, I rolled over and stood up. I peered over, wishing not for the first time that the drop was not so high - I was struck by the urge to cliff-jump every-time I was standing here. I *knew* Bruce would strangle me at the very mention of it, though, even if I was dumb enough to think it wasn't too high. I left the cliff alone and turned towards the house.

I had a feeling it would be a long walk back. I also had a feeling I would enjoy not getting back too soon. The later I got home, the later I would see Bruce. I rubbed my forehead, sighing and started walking.

The woods was a lot darker now, than it had been when I'd run through it. I had to duck invisible branches that suddenly became visible two inches from my face and sidestep plants that grew instantly before I set my foot down. I didn't question the luck - or skill, that had gotten me through this woods at top speed without hitting anything. I was thinking about whether or not Bruce was going to bawl me out, or sit me down for another one of those talks.

Truth be told, I wanted one of those talks. Maybe I could distract him by asking, if he looked like he wanted to yell. I watched the ground and the space before me, with a more careful eye as I walked. All I needed now was to trip and hurt myself, walking.

Suddenly the roar of the batcopter was heading my way. I stepped into the clearest clearing I could find and reached up just as the rope fell to the ground. I wrapped my arm around it and began climbing, even as the copter lifted up and began sailing away.

I could feel the adrenaline building again, Bruce was in costume and we were headed for the city. I hauled myself hand over hand up the rope, holding back a yelp at the exhilaration. When I plopped into the seat beside Bruce I found my costume waiting. I edged into the back part of the copter and changed quickly. Bruce didn't say anything; I figured he was still pissed but ignoring it for now. I wondered what was up, but didn't ask.

He'd just say something like 'if you had been home, you would have found out'. Sometimes.. sometimes I felt like he treated me like a kid and I hated it. Especially when he would turn around and treat me like a partner, almost an equal and like his best friend. It frustrated the hell out of me.

I jumped into the seat next to him and stayed quiet. I couldn't keep the excited smile off my face, though. At least not until I thought that somewhere someone had to be in serious trouble, for us to be called. Much as I loved being Robin, Boy Wonder, I didn't like the necessary requirement that someone be in trouble. People got hurt, too often and too seriously.

I glanced over at Bruce and saw from the grim set of his jaw that he felt the same way.

**********

I stared out the window silently as we lifted off. The Commissioner had told us about the search that was already in progress. I'd kept my mouth shut so he wouldn't know I hadn't known why we'd been called, but I quickly found out two young kids had gotten themselves a boat and set sail - out into the sea with a storm coming up. It was apparently a little wooden rowboat and from what their hysterical parents could figure, the kids didn't have lifejackets or a radio, or supplies of any kind.

Batman and I were simply joining the rest of the able-bodied sailors and pilots, going out to search the night sea. I saw some of the vehicles had "Wayne Industries" emblazoned on their sides. Batman handed me a pair of binoculars as we headed out to search our assigned section of waters, because with a wooden boat and an approaching storm we couldn't use any of our usual scanners to find them.

As we flew out over the water, I thought back to the parents of the missing kids, holding each other too tightly to breathe, whispering to each other, letting the police lead them and reassure them. I saw the mother's face, how terrified she looked, not knowing where her kids were, whether they were safe or injured or dead. I saw the father, trying to look brave, trying to hold his wife and be strong, but it had been so obvious he was close to breaking down himself. I had an image of the kids, probably laughing as they took the boat, excited for their great adventure.

They probably didn't realize anyone would be worried - they knew where they were, what was the problem? I felt a knot in my stomach. I glanced over at Bruce, he was programming the copter to fly itself through a search pattern over the waters. I held the binoculars tightly, returning to them to scan the sea below. I watched, my eyes on auto pilot like the copter itself, as my stomach froze and my mind churned. Finally I swallowed and tried speaking.

"I'm sorry.. about earlier. I know I should have been watching where I was going."

I didn't hear an answer, so after a bit I risked another quick look at Bruce. He was staring through another pair of binoculars. He was acting like he hadn't heard me, so I guessed it meant he was still angry and wasn't ready to accept an apology. I felt something inside me begin to shake. I tried taking a deep breath and concentrating on looking for those kids.

After a little while I decided I couldn't just sit here and not say anything about it and if he was going to stay quiet I had a chance to get it out. It felt weird, both of us staring in opposite directions; it was almost like he wasn't really there, wasn't really listening.

"I know I've been doing some things lately that I shouldn't. I've got a lot of problems on my mind and some of them...I just don't know what to do about 'em. I keep...thinking I'll figure something out but then I can't take it anymore and I have to get away from it. I know...that's not a good reason for being so distracted, for getting into trouble. But I just.." I took another deep breath and said the rest of it.

"It's just that I used to...this is gonna sound dumb, but I used to be able to fly. And now its like I'm always stuck on the ground, or falling. I feel like I've lost everything I was and knew, and its been replaced by things...that I'm not sure fit. I'm not saying I don't appreciate everything you've done and I'm not saying I want to leave. It's just that I.. I don't know. I miss it. I miss flying."

The sea looked very cold and very empty. No sign of the kids, so far, no calls on the radio other than those saying nothing. I watched in silence and waited. I tried to keep myself calm, because if my eyes were filled with tears I couldn't see. I chewed on my tongue and wondered if Bruce really wasn't listening.

"I understand."

His voice startled me; I hadn't expected an answer, hadn't expected this one.

"You miss your family, your home.. there's nothing to apologize for."

When he fell silent again I glanced back. He was staring out at the waters, not moving, and it looked like he wasn't going to say anything more. I didn't know if I was glad he'd said he understood, or mad because.. because it was all he'd say. I knew I had a lot more I needed to say but I wasn't sure.. if he wanted to hear it right now.

I keeping looking through my binoculars, part of me wondering if those kids were OK, hoping to god they were. Part of me was desperately trying to decide what to do, what to say, whether to say anything. I needed to reach out and quite honestly, Bruce was one of my best friends. I had never before felt like...I doubted he would be available for me. I wrestled with needing him to listen and wanting to give him the space he seemed to be asking for.

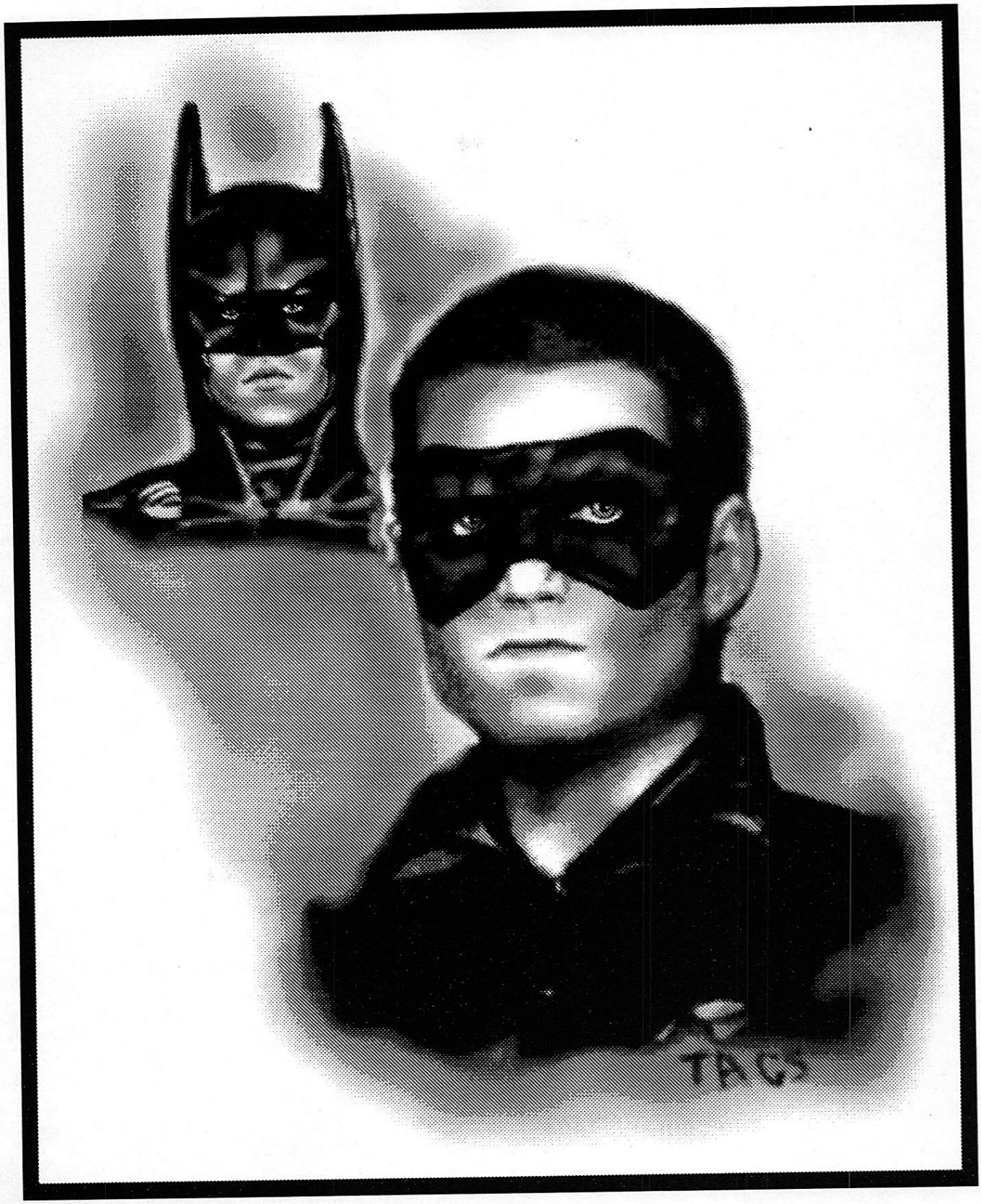
Finally I could only ask. "Can I...tell you about it?" I had never heard my voice shake so badly. I'd said it so quiet I couldn't be sure he'd heard me; I licked my lips, ready to ask again louder.

"Of course." He sounded surprised. I glanced over and saw him watching me. I turned back to my post as he did, watching for those kids in the midst of it all.

Now that I knew I could, I wasn't sure I knew what to say. "When we would practice we would go out to the bars that were hung up.. my dad would climb up and get to swinging and he'd call out to whichever one of us was going to work on something that he was ready. Sometimes the others would be there, watching or helping. When I was trying to learn a new trick, I remember how my dad would talk me through it, even as I was standing there with my hand on the bar, ready to go.. I would be standing there, watching him and I knew that no matter what I did he would be there to catch me.

"And when I did it right, his hands would be holding mine and I'd feel like I would never, ever fall. I spent my life letting him or my brother hold me like that.. pushing me off into the sky and catching me. I grew up flying, sailing through the air, knowing that even if the ground pulled at me once in a while I would be right back in the air again, flying, as if nothing had ever gone wrong. I felt like.. like I belonged there, flying under the tent, throwing myself into the air like a bird.

"And I can't do that anymore. I feel like I've had my wings clipped and I have to sit and watch everything from the ground level. And when I do manage to climb up someplace and look down, knowing that I could fly if I wanted.. there's no one waiting to catch me. That if I start to fall, I'll keep falling.. all the way down."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I had to stop and wipe my eyes, quickly pressing the lenses to my eyes again. Bruce didn't say anything, but suddenly I felt his hand on my back. I didn't move, didn't say any more.

"I see them."

"Where?" Bruce was next to me and I pointed. Everything I'd said was pushed back as I gazed down at those kids, huddled together in the boat. Bruce circled the copter and radioed the Search and Rescue base. I kept my glasses fixed on those kids, as if by seeing them I would prevent them from disappearing into the ocean.

We landed right next to them and I grinned at them as the door slid open. The boy was holding his arms around his sister, they both looked thrilled- whether it was just for being rescued, or because of who it was, I couldn't tell. It didn't really matter, though. It just felt damned wonderful to step into the boat and lift each of them up to Batman and watch him settle them safely into the back of the copter.

As we spun back towards the docks, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked over and saw the girl smiling shyly. "Can we get your autographs?"

I heard Bruce stifling a laugh. I just smiled and dug into the side compartment for pen and paper.

**********

Two days later I came home from school with a wad of paper I'd retrieved from the bottom of my locker. I wasn't planning on taping it to the fridge, but I *was* going to leave it on my desk.. just in case anyone wanted to look at it. Not that I suspected anyone of going through my things, but just in case.. I laid the paper carefully on the top of several other papers and books, tilted it enough to make it look causal, then made a move to head for the kitchen for a snack.

The red 'A' caught my eye as I turned away and I tried not to smile. A knock on the door startled me and I looked over as Bruce peered in. "Hey, got a minute?"

"Sure.." I walked over as he stepped back into the hallway and followed him downstairs. "What's up?"

"I have something I want you to see. Tell me what you think of it."

"OK." Seemed harmless enough. Probably another batcontraption that he wanted to test out. I didn't say anything, keeping my guesses to myself. Bruce led me outside, though and I saw two dirtbikes sitting by the garage. I glanced over but Bruce didn't say anything. He got on one bike and waved me towards the other.

"Where are we going?"

"I told you. I have something I want you to see."

Apparently it wasn't at the house. Duh. I climbed on the bike and strapped on the helmet. Bruce gunned his motor and took off, I followed without the chance to ask where the hell he was going when he didn't follow the drive down to the road. Instead, we followed a dirt track through the woods, headed for the cliff. I wondered briefly if this was going to be an object lesson. He hadn't mentioned my blind run at the cliff earlier, not even to tell me not to do it again. Of course, I'd figured that one out already.

When we reached the cliff face, I stopped my bike and stared. I'm sure my jaw was hanging open but I didn't care. I stood up, absentmindedly propping the bike up and dropping my helmet. Bruce was watching me as I walked forward, staring, totally amused. I walked right up and laid my hand on the edge of it, testing to see if it was real, fingering the smooth fabric before turning back to Bruce. He smiled.

"What do you think?"

"I.. They're beautiful." I looked back at the gliders, mesmerized by the stripes of color in their wings, the black sheen of the frames, and I realized I could feel a wind just strong enough.. I knew why Bruce had done this and I tried to tell him how glad I was.

He laughed when I just gaped at him. "Have you ever been hang gliding before?" I nodded. "Then come on. Let's get strapped in and go, so we can be back in time for dinner."

I watched as he headed over to the other glider, whose wings were not as bright, but made of sharp, strong patterns of dark colors. I felt like I was in a trance, as I moved forward and rested my hand on the bars. A thousand words, questions and gratitude's played through my head. Then I let them go and stared out at the sky. Here I come, I called out to it.

I could have sworn it called back, that it was ready.

We glided for what must have been hours. It seemed like forever, anyway. The sky was clear and the winds were strong and the wings kept up afloat like they were a part of us. I only yelled in delight two or ten times, mostly I just emersed myself in the sensations of flying again. When we finally landed, I couldn't stop grinning. As soon as Bruce got himself free of his harness I was on him, grabbing him in a bear hug and squeezing too tightly.

"Hey, easy there! All right, I'm guessing you enjoyed that?" Bruce laughed and didn't try to push me away.

"Thank you!" It was the only thing I could think of, but it was enough. It was exactly what I meant. He'd given me back the gift of flight.. and for the first time in many months, I felt alive again. I felt happy. I kept my arms around him, still soaring on the sensations of being carried by the wind. Bruce gave me a hug and started to let go. When he realized I wasn't ready to let *him* go, he put one arm back around me.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, Dick. I only wish.."

"It was enough. It was perfect! Oh, Bruce, it was wonderful!" I felt like jumping up and down. I looked up at him, feeling my grin splitting my face open, knowing that I probably looked goofy pumped up as I was. But it didn't matter because Bruce had the same expression in his eyes. I didn't know how much he'd flown like that before, but he knew what it was like and he knew how wonderful it was. Besides, he was grinning like a fool, too. I yelped one more time and heard him join me.

"When can we do that again?"

"Well, if the winds are strong enough we can go tomorrow. But-" And he looked stern and serious. "You have to get your homework done. You can't spend all your time on the hang glider."

Slowly I nodded. "I know. I promise, I won't ignore my work." I sighed, because I felt so light that I knew gravity could never hold me down again. I felt like I could, well, fly. I laughed. I could!

Bruce shook his head at me, probably not sure that I would ever calm down again. "Come on, then. We've got to collect the bikes and get back to the house before Alfred sends the dogs searching for us."

I laughed and had to say it again. "Thank you." I hugged him again, wanting to tell him *exactly* what this meant to me, how much it meant, how I now felt like I could do anything anyone ever called on me to do because I knew that I could fly. That I was still the Robin that leapt into the air without a glance at the ground.

I let go of Bruce and stepped towards the truck that was waiting. "Is there a double harness on one of those? I want to bring Davy out here. Teach him how to fly."

"Yes, I got one. I didn't know if you knew how to fly one of those things." Bruce slid behind the driver's wheel and looked over at me. "Fasten your seatbelt."

"What? Oh, right.." I grinned again.

**********

I dreamed about him again. I knew I would, I had been at least twice a week for a month. The dreams were getting more intense, more.. interesting. Which was making real life more difficult. I made up for it, though, by spending every free moment I had working out. Davy had teased me once about subverting hormonal energy. When I'd just stared at him guiltily, he'd shut up. I hadn't told him who I was thinking about but he was nice about it. Even offered to help me take my mind of my troubles.

I'd smiled and told him I would keep his offer in mind. I knew how he felt about me. Heck, I knew *exactly* how he felt. The only difference was, his object of affection/lust/distraction knew how he felt and was willing to consider the matter. Mine probably hadn't a clue and would freak if I said anything.

But at least I could dream. The latest one involved he and I sitting at the top of the cliff, watching the birds fly by. We were sitting side by side, our shoulders and knees touching. We'd been talking, but I couldn't remember what. Perhaps the dream had actually started after we'd fallen silent. I watched the sky, full of birds and clouds and sunshine.

He'd placed his hand on my arm and pulled me around to face him. I'd opened my mouth to say something, ask him what he was doing and he'd placed his finger on my lips. Whatever words I'd had faded away at the touch of his skin. I wanted to kiss that finger, caress it with my lips, work my way to other parts of his body. I didn't get the chance, though, as he moved his finger away.

Before I could feel more than a first stab of disappointment, he leaned closer and laid his lips on mine. I'd closed my eyes and let him put his arms around me, holding me close as our bodies pressed closer together. I felt like I was on fire and I reached out to grab at him, draw him to me. He leaned me back, to lie on the ground and laid himself carefully on top of me.

I'd moaned, feeling the warm delicious weight of his body on mine, feeling his hands on the sides of my face, holding me as he kept kissing me, drawing my tongue into his mouth, pressing his own inside mine. I could feel the firm pressure of his cock against my leg and knew

he could feel mine. I drew my legs up, on either side of him, wrapping my arms around his back and pulling him closer, as he moved faster with more intensity, devouring my mouth with his as we lay locked in the embrace I'd always wanted.

Just as he'd moved his hands down to my waist, to open my clothes and answer my prayers, I found my eyes opening and saw a dark bedroom form in the shadows of the woods at the top of the cliff. It was a dream, of course. I knew it, knew it was all I could ever get, more than I could hope for.. knew that I wouldn't be able to sleep for a long time. I stayed in bed long enough to deal with the effects of my dream, rubbing myself under the blankets alone even as the phantoms of the dream swirled inside my mind. I wanted it to be his hand that was moving on my body.

But since it wasn't, I did what I could and then got out of bed. I wrapped a robe around myself and padded downstairs to make a mug of cocoa. A middle of the night ritual, by now. So far no one had caught me, asked me what I was doing and shouldn't I be in bed asleep. I took the mug back with me to the study.. one of the studies, the one I used most often. Especially at night, when I couldn't sleep. I sat down at the desk and snapped on a small lamp and turned the computer on.

I loved the net, because it was up at all hours, waiting for me. And because I could hide myself as much as I wanted, or immerse myself among a dozen faceless strangers or faceless friends. I logged onto my main account, the one that identified me only as Richard Grayson, simple resident of Gotham City. I had another that was through Wayne Industries, that made it a little easier to know who I was, living at the Wayne Manor, access to all the neat stuff only the top executives could reach. And then there was my anonymous account, the one I used when I wanted to fly the net as Robin.

I loved going to the Batman groups from that account. I didn't know if Bruce knew about that or not, although he had been the one to assure me no one could trace the anonymous account. I had spent many wonderful, hilarious and frustrating hours interacting with people as Robin. It was fun, even when I swore I was going to trash the account and never do it again. But then I'd remember that some people were glad to see me.. well, a virtual Robin anyway. And I'd go back after a few days and find that I enjoyed it again.

I didn't want to play with that right now, though. I didn't want to read my personal mail, either, which would be on my second account. No, what I wanted right now was a balance between reality and anonymity, a way to ask some questions and be treated with basic respect, without dealing with the intricacies of friendships.

I found the group I wanted, and settled in to compose my message.

>>QUEERNET
>> FROM:RICHARD GRAYSON richard@vianet.com
>> SUBJECT:FALLING IN LOVE
>I have to start by saying I don't know what is happening. I
>don't know if I should call it love, or lust, or something else entirely.
>I just don't know what to do, because I keep dreaming about him..

I wrote for half an hour, writing and rewriting. When I finally sent it off, I sat back and told myself it would be days before I would get replies. I decided to distract myself and sat back to read through the accumulated posts on the group. I even replied to a few.

When I was thinking I might switch accounts and read my personal mail, I discovered I had been yawning fiercely for some time. I shook my head, recalling Bruce's warning that if I got addicted to the net he would tie me up and drag me outside, stake me to a tree and leave me breathing fresh air until I screamed. Or was it 'stopped screaming'? I didn't remember. But I didn't want to test it and I shut off the computer and headed back upstairs.

I fell asleep as soon as I hit the pillow.

**********

The dishes clinked softly as I laid the dry plate down on the stack. I was helping Al do the dishes - not because I'd gotten into trouble but because I still felt weird about having someone do all my chores for me. Besides, it was nice to stand around and talk to the old guy. Reminded me a little of Stern, the head clown who used to treat all us kids like his own grandkids. I wondered if he was still traveling with the circus, if he could still do those cartwheels and hand springs. He'd been getting a little stiff when..

I wiped another glass dry and let myself remember for a moment. Then I turned my thoughts to other problems. Beside me, Al had his hands in the soapy water all the way up to his elbows, apparently unconcerned that I hadn't said a word since we'd started. Usually I don't shut up. I set the glass down carefully.

"Al.. can I ask you about something?"

"Of course, Master Dick."

Someday I was going to ask him not to call me that. But not until I could figure out what he *should* be calling me. "I was.. I mean, I've been.." This wasn't going to be easy. I leaned forward against the cabinet, twisting the towel in my hands. "What do you do when you're in love with someone and they don't love you back?"

Al didn't say anything for a moment, he handed me another plate to dry. Calmly he asked, "Are you certain your affections are not returned?"

I nodded quickly. "I know h--" I stopped, then figured there was no harm in just saying it. "I know he doesn't. He.. couldn't."

"Because he doesn't like men." Al's tone told me not only was he not concerned with my admission, he wasn't terribly surprised. Someday I was going to find something he *didn't* know.

"Yeah." I breathed it out, feeling some of the tension drain with it. Now at least I knew I had someone to talk to about it. Sorta.

"As I said, are you certain he doesn't feel the same way?"

His leading tone made me wonder what he thought he was talking about. "What do you mean?" Did he know something I didn't? I felt my heart skip. No, surely that was impossible. Granted, Al would know if anyone did, but still..

Al kept washing dishes and said, "I believe, Master Dick, from what I have observed, that were you to broach the subject of your feelings, you would be pleasantly surprised."

He had to be talking about something else. Some *one* else. If this were true.. if Al was right, why hadn't he said anything himself? Why hadn't.. "How do you know?"

"I've seen the way he looks at you, when he's here."

When he's here? But that wouldn't.. I knew what he meant. I relaxed, but also felt hugely disappointed. "You mean Davy?"

Al turned at my tone. "Why yes.. isn't that-?"

I shook my head. "I know that Davy likes me. He told me, last week, in fact." I smiled, remembering that kiss. It *had* been nice. It just wasn't who I'd wanted it to be.

"You're in love with someone else," Al observed.

"Yeah.. which makes it worse, because if I wasn't then.. well then Davy and I could be together and I wouldn't have to worry about anything. Well, except for the usual things two guys together have to worry about." Sometimes Batman and Robin got called, to find a gang of bashers roaming the neighborhoods near the gay bars. I especially enjoyed beating up those guys. I set another plate on the stack and continued. "But I can't.. I can't do that to Davy. I'm in love with this other person and he's.."

"Definitely not gay?"

"If he is, he does one damn good job of hiding it." I shook my head. "That isn't all, though." My voice dropped. There was a lot more to it, but I knew I didn't want to say it all.

"What is wrong?" He said it gently and I had the feeling that I could say it all and not only would I have a sympathetic ear, and good advice, but he wouldn't tell a soul. Heck, I *knew* how good Al was at keeping secrets.

But I wasn't ready yet. "He's.. older than me. So even if he was interested in guys.. he wouldn't be interested in me. And I don't even know--" I cut myself off. Those particular thoughts hadn't occurred to me before.

"What?" He prodded gently.

I sounded kinda amused, as I said the words as they'd just occurred to me. "I don't even know if what I feel is real, or not. I've never felt like this.. I've dated people before, slept with a few.. but this.. it might not be what I think." Now *that* made me feel miserable. It was bad enough being in love and knowing I couldn't do a thing about it. But to think I wasn't really in love.. that was worse.

I looked over to get the next dish and found they were all washed and dried. Al took me by the arm and lead me over to the table. I sat down, staring glumly at the tabletop.

"Why would it not be love?"

I liked the way he sounded like it would be. I'd heard too many people say kids my age couldn't really fall in love. They called our feelings 'crushes' and lust and disregarded them all over the place. I rubbed my hands over each other, trying to put it into words without spilling the beans. "It's possible.. that I just like him. That.. that I love him but not that way. That I feel.. grateful to him. Instead of..what I think I feel."

"Isn't it possible, that you feel *all* of those things?"

I looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that feelings do not cancel each other out. You may feel grateful, you may love him in a non-romantic sense, you may consider him a good friend. And you may also love him. There's nothing wrong with that.. although it can be quite confusing."

"You're telling me." I smiled. "You know, that.. sounds right. But that makes it harder, because all those other things he could deal with. But how could I ever tell him how I feel and make him understand?"

Al gave me the fisheye. "I was under the impression you did not want him to know how you felt."

I shrugged. This whole thing was making my head spin. "I don't know. I wish.. I wish I could tell him and find out he felt the same way. But since I can't guess it would be better not to say anything. I don't want to freak him out. I don't want him.."

"Deciding he no longer wants you around?"

I nodded. That would be the worst. "I suppose I shouldn't do anything. I...thanks for listening, Alfred. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome, Master Dick. Perhaps you should go upstairs and get some work done. Math is good for distracting from affairs of the heart."

I laughed. "Yeah, right. You're just trying to trick me into doing my algebra."

Al smiled at me. "Of course, sir. I'll bring you up some tea and scones." He eyes twinkled, his good humor made me feel warm all over. Like this really was a place I could call home.

I grinned slowly. Bruce had teased me for weeks upon discovering I liked tea and scones.. something about putting on airs and that next I'd be eating caviar and champagne. I'd ignored him.. but quite honestly, down deep it hurt. Not much, but enough that I was careful when I asked for them. But Al knew.. he always knew. I headed upstairs thinking I might actually do my homework for a change.

Something else I kept hidden. My teacher told me my grades would improve automatically if I completed my homework every night. But sometimes it wasn't my fault - Robin couldn't ask the criminal element to restrain their activities to weekends. Other times I just had too much else to do, too much else on my mind. And sometimes, it was simply that algebra still confused me. It was easier to ignore.

I found Bruce standing outside my door, arms crossed, glaring at me like I'd done it again. I stopped and swallowed. "Hey, Bruce." I didn't sound as casual as I'd hoped.

"Dick.. what's this about your grades?"

I groaned, inside. "Look, I was gonna tell-"

Bruce grinned. "Nice job. Al wants to tape it to the fridge.. I told him that might be a little embarrassing. But congratulations."

I stared at him, then it dawned. "Thanks." I smiled, glad they'd noticed, glad it wasn't about my math grade.

"Keep up the good work," He patted my shoulder as he walked past.

"Yeah.." Yeah right.

That night I had another dream and ended up spending the wee hours of the morning on the net, exchanging mail with people who had answered my previous post. A lot of them knew just how I felt.. and most of them said nothing would ever come of it except a lot of pain. I went back up to my room and wrapped myself in blankets and cried quietly into my pillows.

**********

The bag swung backwards. Before it could begin its forward swing I spun again, foot lifted high. I felt the resounding slam of the ball of my foot against the smooth canvas. The bag swung backwards. I spun again, foot kicking high.

Each movement was performed in utter silence. The only sound was the thud of my foot making contact with the bag. I made no noise when I landed, when I spun, the bag made no noise as it swung. I leapt again and felt the reassuring smack of the bag against my foot. As I landed I knew exactly how long before I had to jump again, I knew exactly how hard I'd hit the bag, how fast it would swing.

I couldn't see the bag at all. The lights were on and my eyes were wide open, but the tears were streaming so fast and so hard that all I could see were the waves of light broken into unrecognizable patterns. I jumped again, knowing the kick was right, rewarded by the contact of the bag. I didn't even hear my breath, as I somehow kept it slow and calm.

I never thought it would hurt this badly. With that thought I stumbled, missed the timing for my jump and fell forward into the bag. I grabbed it and held on, tightly. I let it hold me up as the noise of my grief struggled to break through.

Finally I slumped to the floor, letting go of the bag and held myself in my arms as best I could. The circus was going to be here tomorrow and I was going to visit old friends, people I'd known for years and missed so terribly. But they weren't going to be there.

A harsh cry filled the room, echoing off the walls, bouncing back towards me like the punching bag. At first it made no sense, then as it continued on and on filling the room and my mind it began to take form.

"Mom!"

"Dad!"

It became a wailing, over and over, until it was all I heard; capturing my awareness like the motions of the kicks had earlier. Everything else vanished and I was left listening to the cries. I didn't even know they were my own.

Something touched my arm and I flinched away. That touch encircled me and I was pulled into someone's embrace. I found myself sitting against someone, holding me, rocking me gently back and forth and I just kept screaming for my family. A voice crooned softly, whispering that it understood, that it knew, that I should go on and scream and cry just as much and as loud as I needed to. A hand held my head against something soft and warm and as I drew in a shuddering

breath I heard the beating of a heart. I grabbed onto whatever had taken me and prayed it would not let me go until the pain had gone away.

Gradually the room reformed around me, my eyes cleared as I had no more tears to lose, my throat let go of the last cry as the rawness strangled my voice. I recognized the arms around me and pushed myself closer to him. Bruce shifted his grip to hold me tighter. I turned my face towards him, buried in his chest and tried to let the grief out. But my body couldn't cooperate, it was exhausted and hurting and needed a rest. Shallow sobs pounded inside me and all I could do was try to catch my breath.

I felt Bruce's hand on my head, holding me close, sheltering me from whatever might come. I felt the strength in his arms, the warmth of his breath on my neck, in my ear as he whispered softly to me. I held him close and knew it was just a dream. He couldn't hold me quite so tenderly when I was awake. I turned my head, drew in another breath and felt that for now my tears could stand away. I kept my arms around his body, soaking up the feel of his firm muscles under my fingers. He leaned away and looked down at me, concern and sadness slashing his eyes.

"I am so sorry, Dick." His voice was still soft, edged with his own grief at my pain. All I saw were his lips as they moved and I felt so safe, so loved and so scared at the depth of my hurting. I leaned forward and brushed his lips with mine, wanting to fill my heart with love instead of fear, wanting to fill my ears with sweet nothings instead of cries for people not so long gone. Wanted to fill my body with cherished touches instead of the hard flat pounding of a foot against an unfeeling bag. I held my arms around him, holding him close, kissing him and knowing that nothing else could come so close as pure delight, on the heels of such excruciating agony.

He pushed me away from him and it suddenly occurred to me this was no dream. I felt as if every drop of blood had rushed from my face, spilling into my stomach and other more embarrassing regions. I scuttled away out of his lap, staring, shocked, at the look on his face. I tried to mutter an apology but I couldn't find the words to say what I felt, because what I really wanted to say was 'take me upstairs and love me'.

"Oh god," I breathed and clambered to my feet and took off running. My heart started pounding again as I tried not to think about the ramifications of what I'd just done. He knew, he knew and he had been so shocked.. had that even been a trace of disgust on his face? I wasn't sure but it didn't matter because I'd done something I had told myself I could never do. It was horrible, he had been giving me comfort I so badly needed and I'd forced my feelings on him, forced myself on him.

If I hadn't been so spent I would have started crying again. As it was all I could do was try to outrun it. I wiped my face on my sleeve and told myself I had royally screwed up.

I tripped and went sprawling on the ground. It slammed the breath from my lungs and I rolled over and tried desperately to pull air back into them. My stomach ached and I grabbed the dirt with my fists and closed my eyes. I felt as if my life had fallen down around me and lay scattered on the ground. If I thought before I'd lost my wings, it was nothing compared to now, with them torn off and shredded, lying bloodied at my feet.

"You have a bad habit of running away from your problems."

I tried to sit up, but my stomach spasmed and I stayed where I was, holding it. I looked over and saw Bruce standing not far away, back along the path I'd come. And I realized he'd tripped me, pushed me down. I saw the bike behind him and knew he'd gotten ahead of me and ambushed me.

"Wha.." I tried to breathe again, this time my stomach was more accommodating.

Bruce just stood there, staring at me. His face was a mask and it occurred to me that it might be to spare my feelings. I pushed myself into a sitting position and found I couldn't look at him anymore. "I'm sorry." I sounded as miserable as I felt. I wasn't surprised he'd followed me, I just wasn't sure I could handle it.

When I moved to stand up, Bruce walked forward and held out his hand. I took it and let him pull me to my feet. I still couldn't look at him and I wondered if there was anything I could say that could erase what I'd done. Erase how I felt.

He pulled my chin up with his hand and made me look at him. He looked rather calm. He looked at me, saying nothing, then he shook his head and asked, "How long have you felt this way?"

My voice was still shaking. "I don't know.. a month, maybe. Maybe two." Maybe three.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought.. I know you don't like men and I didn't want to make you.. uncomfortable to be around me. You're one of my best friends and I don't want.. you to freak out on me." I wanted to sound cool, mask the sound of my heart gibbering and threatening to break.

"You know that?" The tone of his question sounded odd. I just nodded. He started to say something, then he backed off a bit and looked at me, thinking. "God, you must have been going through hell this last couple of months. No wonder you've been so distracted."

I nodded. With this, the circus coming back and my schoolwork going to hell in a hand basket (which meant teacher conferences, letters home, study hall and probation from the swim team) the only high point of my life was flying my hang glider. Even my rides to the park with Davy were colored with the regret that he still wished I could return his affection. He said his feelings were fading, but I knew they weren't. Mine certainly were not.

"Dick, I'm sorry."

"For what? It isn't your fault.. I promise I won't do that again." I said it quickly, to reassure him and try to make up for some of what I was afraid I'd destroyed.

Bruce shook his head. I couldn't understand why he was acting so calm.. and then it occurred to me that if he was calm, it meant I hadn't ruined anything. If he was willing to ignore it, I could pretend as well.

"Can we just let it go and pretend it didn't happen?" I offered.

Bruce stared at me quietly for a moment, then nodded. "If you want. Dick.. it doesn't bother me. As long as you know I don't feel the same way."

I nodded. "I know. I.. that's why I wasn't going to tell you. I didn't want to bother you."

Bruce smiled. "You should have told me. Then you wouldn't have spent the last two months worrying so much about my finding out."

I looked askance at him. "How did you know-?"

"Alfred told me--"

"He *what*?!"

"Easy! Relax, he didn't tell me what was wrong, he just said.. one of the things bothering you was something you didn't want me to know about. I thought.." his voice faded then he said it matter-of-factly, "I thought it was about your family. About it being my fault they died."

"It wasn't your fault." I said it without thinking and surprised myself. I hadn't realized I'd stopped blaming him. The look of gratitude on Bruce's face made me glad I'd said it.

"Thank you, Dick."

"You're welcome." I tried to sound calm, but sniffling sorta ruined that. Bruce held out his hand.

"Shall we head back to the house?"

"OK.. but Bruce?"

"Yeah?"

"Could you..let me drive?" I *really* didn't want to sit behind him, legs on either side, holding onto him.. He looked at me confused for a moment then smiled.

"Sure."

I managed to smile back.

**********

I decided to take my books downstairs to work. Al was right, math was good for distracting me from other problems. Didn't mean I did any better on my math, though. I headed for my usual study and ran into Al on the way.

"I took the liberty of putting a tray in the study," Al inclined his head, indicating where they were waiting for me.

"Thanks, Al. But I'm studying in here." I pointed to the room I was headed for. Why would he put the tray in the wrong room?

"Yes, sir, but I believe you'll find the light is better in here."

He was definitely steering me into the other room. Well, OK. I never knew Al to do something without a reason.. and it was usually the right thing, right reason. I went into the study he'd left the tray in. He simply nodded and went on.

Apricot scones and iced tea. I grinned and sat down in the large chair next to the table holding the food. Kicking the ottoman closer, I propped my feet up to make a desk with my knees and opened the book. Math. Bleah. I ignored the question of Al's actions, figuring it would either make sense eventually or not.

I stared at the book and saw only Bruce's face. Sighing, I let myself indulge for awhile. Couldn't hurt.. anymore than it already did. Bruce hadn't said anything more about it after we got back to the house and he seemed willing to completely forget about it. Part of me wished he'd been more upset, just so we could talk about it. But I knew I didn't want to fight with him. Leaning back in the chair I gazed up at the ceiling and wondered what he was doing right now. Where in the house was he? Could I go find him, casually join him wherever he was, whatever he was doing..?

I laughed at myself. That was *not* the way to convince Bruce that I wasn't going to bother him. Following him around like a puppy would only annoy him. Better to keep my desires to myself.

"Will there be anything else, sir?"

I looked up at Al's question, but he wasn't there. Confused, I looked around the room.. empty. Was I hearing things, now? Had I gone completely nuts?

"No, Alfred, thank you." It was Bruce's voice. Oh, god, that voice. I wanted to.. I shook my head. I couldn't and that was all there was to it. I really had to work on getting over him.

"Very good, sir."

What was going on? I got up and prowled the room, wondering how in the hell I was hearing their voices.

"Alfred? Was there something you wanted?"

When Bruce spoke again I found it. The intercom system was switched on. I moved to flick it off, not wanting to intrude on a private conversation - even if it wasn't about anything important. Then it occurred to me that this might be the reason Al had sent me in here. What was he up to? I decided I could listen in a bit more and if it wasn't something I needed to hear, I could always turn the com off.

"I was wondering about Master Dick."

Yup, definitely a private conversation I shouldn't hear. Which meant I was *absolutely* going to listen. If the com was on by mistake, I'd just pretend I hadn't heard.

"What about him?" Bruce sounded concerned.. and I was not pleased to find myself melting a little. One little mention of my name and he sounds concerned. Well, OK it was a little more than that.

"I was simply wondering if everything was all right."

"What do you - oh, you mean this afternoon? I think he is.. it's not surprising he broke down like that. With the circus in town, all the memories of his family--"

I closed my eyes. With everything else, I still had that in me. I held it back, though, because Al was speaking again.

"I didn't mean that, sir. I was referring to the other matter."

"What other..? Oh." Bruce sounded nervous. "It's nothing. I mean, I told him it doesn't bother me. He'll get over it soon enough."

I bite my lip. He sounded so sure, so.. cavalier. I didn't want to get over it. I reached out to flick the switch off. I didn't want to hear..

"That isn't exactly what I meant."

Huh?

"What do you mean, Alfred?" It sounded like Bruce was confused, but not.. really confused. Almost like he knew what Al was going to say. I hoped he'd say it anyway, because *I* had no clue.

There was silence for a moment and I realized after he spoke that Al had been trying to figure out how to say it nicely. "I was asking about your feelings for Master Dick."

"*MY* feelings? Alfred, I.. I care about him a great deal. He's one of my two best friends." I felt a lump form in my throat. "He's my partner, my friend.. how am I supposed to feel?"

I leaned against the back of the sofa I was kneeling on. He'd never actually told me he cared about me. I had never figured out why, although I knew he considered me a friend. But best friend? I found myself smiling. It wouldn't be so bad, I realized, to be in love with a best friend. Somehow it was like I knew he would forgive me any indiscretions, any slips of showing how I truly felt. I whispered a silent thanks to Al, for letting me hear this.

"Master Bruce and forgive me for saying this quite so bluntly, but are you sure you don't love him as well?"

Every blood vessel in my body froze. I knew I wasn't breathing, I was going to fall over in a dead faint and they'd find my body stiff as a brick, lying on the floor. What on *earth* was Al talking about?

"What on earth are you talking about?"

For a second I thought I'd spoken aloud, then I recognized Bruce's voice - half strangled in a shocked whisper. Then he sounded like he'd laughed. "What makes you think I love him? Alfred.."

The freeze began thawing and now I felt like I was going to disappear. I told myself he was talking about *that* kind of love. Surely he didn't mean that he didn't even love me as a friend, or, god help me, as a member of the family. Surely he didn't..

"I realize it is not my place to say, sir," I half-choked, knowing that tone and knowing full well it was Al's right and privilege to say anything he darn well pleased. And he did, too, if he thought it needed saying. That thought stopped me. Obviously Al thought he was up to something. "But I have seen you and Master Dick together.. and more importantly, I have seen you when he is not around. Especially when you are unaware of his whereabouts."

"So I worry about him. That doesn't mean I love him. Not that way. I do.. I do.. care about him."

It was interesting that he couldn't say it, even after making it clear what way he meant. But I felt better, knowing it. In fact, I felt those warm fuzzies that I hadn't felt very often at all, in the last year.

"Perhaps not. But you do behave like someone who is in love."

Huh?? I wasn't sure my eyes could get any wider. I checked to see if I was still breathing.

"I what?" He didn't say it as sharply as I'd thought. As sharply as someone.. who knew it was wrong. It was more like someone who'd been found out... I tried not to hold my breath. I didn't want to pass out and miss any of this.

Al said the next very gently, as if he knew Bruce was probably going to deny it all. "Master Bruce, I know that you have never admitted to having feelings of this sort." I figured he meant being attracted to guys. "But the fact remains that you act as though you loved Master Dick. And it would behoove you to discover the true nature..and depth, of your feelings. Before you cause any more unnecessary pain to the young man."

I wanted to curl up and cry. I wanted to run in and hug Al. I wanted to run in and demand to know if it were true. I stayed where I was. If it was true and Bruce *did* love me.. there was an awfully good reason why he wouldn't admit it to himself, or me and Al.

"Alfred.. why are you saying this? Why do you think that I--" Bruce's voice died away, but I didn't hear Al talking. "Alfred. It just isn't possible."

I smiled. I had heard this tone before. He didn't want to admit it. That meant he knew.

"Why not?" Al asked.

"Because I've never.. I've never been attracted to men. Why would I suddenly.. change? Why would I suddenly fall in love.. and with someone who's only 17? Besides, he's my ward! I can't.. be in love with him."

No one said anything for a while. I chewed on my hand, wondering, hoping this would turn out the way I hadn't thought possible.

"I've never felt that age was an obstacle to falling in love. And he is almost a legal adult - and technically he is not your ward." Legally I was my own guardian? Ha! Meant I didn't have to do my homework when he told me. Heh.. "As for being attracted to him, well, the ways of the heart are mysterious, aren't they?" He sounded like he was.. caught up in the romance of it all. It sounded like he was teasing Bruce. Part of me was happy, Bruce needed it. Part of me wanted to run in and tell Al to stop it.. I wanted to defend him from facing something that was no doubt painful.

"Alfred.. I think I'd like to be alone for awhile."

"Of course, sir."

I sat around on the sofa, staring at the walls around me. He loved me? He might actually possibly love me? I wanted to scream. Instead I flicked the intercom switch off and tensed every muscle in my body. When I relaxed, I still felt like screaming. I jumped up when Al entered the room.

"Al! What.. is he going to.. will he.. what.." Al held up a hand. I took a breath and asked, "Do you really think he loves me?" I suddenly felt as if my entire world was resting on the answer to that one question.

Al smiled, "I believe so. The question is, will Master Bruce think so, as well?"

I nodded. I knew about people not wanting to admit they could like someone of the same sex. I knew how much trouble it was, how hard it could be for someone to finally come to terms with their feelings. I told myself I could be patient. I told myself again. I looked up at Al, pleading in my eyes. "What do I do?"

"Be patient, Master Dick. But not.. too patient."

I grinned. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Perhaps.." He smiled suddenly and I still felt like screaming.

"Thanks, Al. You have no idea what this means.."

"I think I do, sir. I couldn't possibly watch the two of you any longer, making yourselves miserable."

"Miserable? Bruce never looked miserable to me." I knew how *I'd* felt. Miserable was a good word.

"Perhaps not. Why don't you finish your algebra and not worry about it for tonight."

"And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow will be another day." Al gave me a crafty, innocent smile and left the room. I settled down to my math book again and saw only Bruce's face. He loved me. Now if only we could convince him.

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The house was quiet - not unusual, in a house this large, for it to be so silent. Noise tended to die out within a few feet of the room the noise was coming from. And there weren't so many people to make noise around here.

I missed the circus. So many people, animals, going about being themselves - the noise level was often strangling. Even at night there was something making noise, whether it was the elephants shifting in their leg chains or the late nights of cards or boisterous activities, or the trains roaring by our campsite by the rails. I had never told Bruce, how hard it had been to fall asleep in my room on the third floor along the front of the house with its insulated walls and distinct lack of anything living within a hundred yards. Even now sometimes I lay on my bed, staring out the windows, wondering if *anything* was stirring, nearby.

Of course I now I had other reasons to lose sleep. But even when all those memories and fears and hopes and worries were quiet, my room would grow still and silent and I would be tempted to turn on my radio just to be able to fall asleep. I remembered the night Bruce had banged on my door at midnight, to tell me it was late and I should be asleep and to shut that thing off. I didn't tell him I *was* asleep, nor that once I snapped it off I'd lain awake for an hour.

There were so many things I never told him about. So many things I still couldn't get used to, so many things I was unsure about. I was damn glad Al was there. He heard it all. He was the one who gave me a tape to play through headphones - specially engineered to let the beeper sound over the noise in case Robin needed to be somewhere. I had no idea where Al had gotten the tape - when I'd asked he simply smiled and changed the subject like he was so good at. The tape sounded like the recorder had been set down in the middle of a circus camped for the night. Sometimes I even imagined I could recognize voices..

But tonight the house was quiet and I wanted it that way. I wanted to be able to hear my heart pounding, hear the soft whisper of breathing, hear the whisk of skin on fabric.. I wanted to hear everything that was created in this room, tonight. I felt my heart singing and the rush in my groin.

I held Bruce's face in my hands and stared into his eyes. He was nervous and didn't try to hide it. That made me feel better - he felt comfortable enough to not hide how he felt. He didn't move and didn't flinch or even blink as I leaned forward and kissed him gently. I kept it short, and kept my mouth closed for this first tender kiss. When I looked up at him again he was just starting to smile. He put his hands around my waist, loosely and when I leaned in again I opened my mouth ever so slightly.

He opened his mouth and met me. I felt his lips pressing against mine, brushing against my mouth, ever so hesitantly flicking his tongue out to touch mine, run over my teeth and brush the inside of my lips. I let him explore slowly, not pushing although my passion had been boiling over since the moment before I touched him. I didn't want to scare him, didn't want him to shy away from something I wanted so badly. I wanted to feel his hands touching me every place.

But for now I was content to stand in the middle of the room, fully clothed, kissing him. Because I was finally kissing him and he was kissing me back and it was beginning to feel as if he enjoyed it as much as I. He pulled my tongue towards him and I must have moaned out loud because he suddenly pulled away and looked at me.

"Ooommm.. Bruce.. do you mind if I throw you on the bed, now?"

I felt his answer, as he began pulling my shirt off. When his fingers brushed my skin along the ribs I felt my legs tremble. I couldn't believe it - every minute touch between us was making every nerve fire. The briefest contact of a fingertip on my chest and I was ready to explode. I held myself back from grabbing him and fucking him just so I could get relief..

When my shirt was lying discarded on the floor Bruce leaned forward and I tensed as I saw his face descend towards my chest. I could anticipate the feel of his tongue and I was ready, willing, oh so eager..

The room was dark and empty. The blankets were strewn onto the floor and my shorts were strained as the effects of my dream pressed against the fabric. I bit back a scream of frustration and let my head fall back onto the pillow. I reached down and pushed my shorts down roughly, grabbing myself and closing my eyes, trying to recapture the sweet agony of the dream, of the waiting, of the tiny touches that made me shiver and moan. The images were too elusive to recreate with any degree of clarity, making me want to cry out that it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that I had to wait, be so patient and nice and understanding when all I wanted was to throw him down- or let him throw me.

I rubbed myself hard and fast, bringing myself off within seconds. The arousal didn't fade, though and I wondered if this was some new form of torture one of our enemies had discovered. Maybe someone had sprinkled me with fairy dust and made me fall in love, knowing I

would never get satisfaction. I thought serious thoughts about shredding my pillow but I found my sanity and knew it wouldn't help.

Neither would a cold shower. Nothing would help except the warm circle of Bruce's arms around me. I wanted to lean into his hold, close my eyes, and let the world fade away. I told myself I didn't even to have sex with him, I would be happy to just be touched. He hadn't even come *near* me during the last two weeks. Never closer than a foot, never within arms' reach if he could avoid it. When he touched me accidentally he always flinched away and apologized..

Al told me I was being very good to hide my devastation from him when he did it. Although I got the impression from Al's tone that he thought maybe I shouldn't. But I didn't want to hurt Bruce. No matter what he did to me, he had good reasons for acting this way and I didn't want to add to his difficulties by making him feel guilty for how I felt. I wanted him to be happy. I wanted to take him in my arms and tell him everything was going to be all right, that he could take his time and that there was nothing wrong with discovering a new side to yourself. I wanted to hold him and make his fears and doubts go away.

It made me think that maybe I was desperately in love. Now if only Bruce would do the same we'd be great..

One good thing of all this was, he stopped bugging me about my school work. No doubt he didn't like the thought of dating a high school kid and one he was responsible for, as well. I tried hard to act like the adult my parents had almost always treated me as, to help Bruce forget. It was difficult, when I had to get Bruce to sign a release form for my return to the swim team when I'd gotten off probation in time for the state meets. I'd wanted to ask him to attend, the first of the races was this Saturday. But I was scared he'd say no. I didn't mind as much his avoiding me at his own prerogative. But to find that he would even when I asked him not to..

I kept the schedule to myself, well mostly. I told Al I would be gone all morning Saturday and Sunday. I'd arranged to meet Davy at his house and ride to the pools with his folks. They were pleased as punch - I got the impression they approved of Davy's choice. Too bad I couldn't chose back. He'd apparently come to terms with it, but his mother was another story. She kept after him to ask me home to supper.

If Bruce kept on, though, I was going to have to take Davy to the park and fuck his brains out.

**********

"Is there a reason you don't want us to attend the swim meet?"

I looked up from throwing clothes into my bag. It was some godawful hour of the morning, hopefully before 4am since I had to be at Davy's at six. I glared - Bruce looked awake, dressed and displeased. I shrugged. "I wasn't sure you had time. Or interest - you've never sounded very interested in these kinds of things." It was true - he'd never done more than ask 'how was practice' or was the pool OK (the one next to the gym, in the house. It was an indoor pool with an adjacent Jacuzzi. I'd had the swim team over a few times and they'd made Al an honorary member, more for his prowess at lemonade than his ability to swim.)

"You thought I wouldn't want to watch you compete?" Bruce sounded more surprised than angry.. not to say he didn't sound angry. I wanted to throw my bag at him. What right did he have to be angry at *me*? He was the one avoiding me, not the other way around.

"Come if you want, then. Doesn't matter." I tried to sound nonchalant. I wasn't sure I succeeded but Bruce didn't appear to notice.

"Aren't you any good?" A bit of humor softened his words, as did the half-grin. God, it was so nice to see him smiling, that I almost dropped my bag and stared. I glanced down, to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything, instead.

"I do OK." I hefted my bag, full of everything I needed. As I walked to the door and past Bruce, I added, "You never asked before."

"About the meet?"

"About whether I was any good."

He followed me down the hall, sounding honestly confused. "I just assumed you were."

Normally I would have greatly appreciated the compliment, but today I was feeling sick of tiptoeing around, acting like nothing was wrong, as well as being nervous about the meet. And it was 345 in the morning. I wanted to be in bed. I even wanted to be asleep.

Bruce followed me downstairs and Al met us with a light breakfast. He looked like he was going with us, too. He also looked awake and cheerful. It wasn't fair. Morning people should be kept away from normal folk. I managed to eat a bagel and some fruit before time to leave. I called Davy and told him we'd given he and his folks a lift. We took the limo. The one big enough to stretch out in and nap. Good thing, too.

Davy's mom and dad were hard pressed to act like they weren't thrilled to meet Bruce. Davy and I stood in the other room, talking. Well actually we were peering around the corner every once in a while and whispering. Davy was approving of my obsession and asking if he could help. I didn't need to hear him say that if watching me wandering around in my swim trunks didn't convince him nothing would. I wanted to punch Davy for that one - because I didn't need to embarrass myself by showing off my erection to a hundred friends and strangers.

"Hey, how long till we have to leave?" Davy wandered into the other room, I followed knowing my jacket would protect me for now.

"We have to be at the pool at 630. So we'll leave in about 45 minutes." Davy's dad had managed to calm down enough to invite Al and Bruce to sit and drink coffee. I snickered at the picture of Davy's mom serving Al.

"Great. Come on, Dick - I wanna show you something." He tugged at my jacket so I'd follow him and he headed for his room.

"What?"

Davy turned and smiled. "Well, if you don't want to embarrass yourself.. I thought you could get rid of it now. You can use my bathroom, or.." He smiled, like he was teasing me. But there was still that hope, that lust in his eyes. And I suddenly realized that I wanted to do it with him. Despite everything Bruce was putting me through I wanted Davy. Or maybe because of everything he was putting me through. It didn't matter. I smiled and saw a huge happy grin appear on Davy's face.

I laughed. "Can you keep quiet?"

He frowned, then it cleared and he said, "I won't tell Bruce, nitwit. Do you think-"

"No," I shook my head. I stepped closer to him. "I mean.. you don't scream, do you? They're gonna hear us otherwise."

He laughed. "Relax. They won't hear a thing." He grabbed my jacket and kissed me. When he pressed up against me I realized I wasn't the only one who needed relief before putting on a swimsuit. It took us about two seconds to take all our clothes off and grab each other again. There was no need nor time to look at each other's bodies, we'd seen them often enough in the locker room. Right now we needed something very specific and we wasted no time getting to it.

Davy's body was slim and smooth, skin pale white and warm. I ran my hands up his sides, then devoured his mouth with mine. He met me with an intensity that made me whimper. To have waited so long for someone to want me, someone I wanted as well - having waited for this for so long I wondered how long I could hold out. Davy grabbed me and began rubbing. I groaned, his fingers around my cock felt so damn good. I didn't ask myself how long it had been but I knew it had been too long.

He rubbed me, pressing himself up against me, kissing me and pressing his other hand into my back to hold me steady. I kept my panting quiet, knowing I sometimes had a tendency to be loud. I gulped air as Davy brought me up, closer and then just as he leaned down to bit my left nipple I grabbed his shoulders and dug my fingers in..

I ejaculated all over him, pushing my body back and forth against his hands. I closed my eyes, sighing in sheer relief. Then I kissed him, because it had been more than pure physical release. I wanted him to know, because he'd been depressed for days after I'd told him about Bruce. Davy kissed me back and I was happy all over to see the smile on his face.

Then I took his cock in my hand and began rubbing. I wondered if maybe I should try something else and I maneuvered Davy backwards, to lay on his bed. I knelt between his legs, still rubbing and smiled at the questioning look on his face. Davy brought his knees up some and I let him lick my fingers. He did so quickly and eagerly, knowing exactly what I had in mind. He began breathing heavy even before I touched him, then I put a finger inside him and stroked. I knew the spot I wanted and when I found it, he arched his back and bit his lip to keep from screaming. I was impressed, but not surprised at his control - it was *really* embarrassing to have your parents hear you having sex.

I fucked him until he came in my hand, bouncing his hips up and down on the bed, holding onto the blankets like he was going to bounce off the bed. When he finally went limp I leaned forward, over him. He reached up and grabbed me by the neck and pulled himself up to kiss me. He grinned.

"So.. I guess we'd better get cleaned up. Ten more minutes and someone's gonna come looking for us.."

He grinned. I followed him to his bathroom - thankfully it opened into his room. We washed up and got dressed. After a couple quick kisses and gropes ('to make sure it worked') we headed back downstairs. From the looks we got I figured they knew what we'd been doing. His mom looked happy, Al was doing a nice job of not smiling. It was Bruce's expression that got me, though. For a split second he looked shocked, or affronted and I saw him almost look hurt before he smiled and looked polite and friendly again.

I didn't yell at him and tell him what a jerk he was and remind him I had a life and feelings and needs and wasn't going to hang around just *waiting* for him to make up his mind. I didn't yell, because that hurt look stabbed through me and made me want to cry. Davy squeezed my

hands as we left the house, everyone in front of us so they couldn't see. His eyes said he knew and he was sorry. Not that we'd done it, but that it had hurt Bruce and hence me.

I wanted to tell him just how much I loved him, how much I appreciated his friendship. I put my arm around his shoulder for a quick hug and showed him to the middle of the limo. The thing had three sections, Bruce and Davy's parents in the back, me and Davy in the middle, Al in front driving. We put the privacy windows up and I told Davy quietly how glad I was we were friends.

When we got to the pools, they headed to the stands and Davy and I headed for the locker rooms. Davy's dad pulled me aside, briefly and when everyone was out of earshot he told me he was concerned. "It may be none of my business, Dick, but I get the feeling Mr. Wayne doesn't care too much for your interest in Davy. I just wanted to tell you, his mother and I approve. And if you need someone to talk to, you can always come to us."

I looked at him for a moment, wondering how Davy had lucked into parents as cool as his. Mine had been cool, too, but then circus people have always been fringe. "Thanks, but I think I can handle it. Besides, it isn't.. exactly that, that bothers him. But I appreciate your concern."

He nodded and went to join the others. I went to find Davy and told him what his dad had said. "You tell him why Bruce was upset?"

"Are you kidding? Bruce would kill me, I think. Either that or just torture me for a few years."

"Heh. Give him time, Dick. He'll come around. You may have to start helping him, though." As we undressed I was pleased to notice our early activities had indeed worked. Absolutely no sign of erections. Now if only I could avoid thinking about it for a couple hours.

"You know, I get the impression Al thinks so, too. I just don't know how to 'help' him."

"Goof. How does anyone convince someone they're in love? Flowers, chocolates, quiet dinners.."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm trying not to scare him off. I think a dozen roses would do that."

Davy hit me with a towel, then sat us down and said in a serious tone, "Dick.. you have to do something. And you have to show him how you feel. Right now he's thinking about himself, about his own feelings and how much he doesn't want to deal with them. You keep telling me how he avoids being near you- well you've got to remind him how much you want to be near *him*. It isn't like you're going to seduce him. You just gotta show him how you feel, remind him that there's someone else involved than just him. Give him flowers. Tell him you love him. Go with him places and invite him along with you. Spend time with him, let him see you staring at him like I know you do when you think he won't see you."

"I don't stare!"

"Then you aren't human." Davy grinned.

I thought about hitting him with the towel, then sighed. "What if he decides he can't deal with it?"

"Then at least you'll know, right? And won't that be better than waiting forever for him to make a move?"

"I guess.. You know, Davy, this isn't really getting me in a good frame of mind to swim."

"What are you talking about? Sure it is! Now you're all revved up to take action! What better way to start than impress him with your physical prowess?"

That time I *did* hit him with a towel. Then I followed him out, for the meet to begin. I tried not to look around to spot Bruce and Al, but I did anyway. I didn't wave, though. I wanted to look dignified. I couldn't help the feeling, though, at seeing two of the people I cared most about, sitting in the stands to watch me race. I wanted to make them proud.

And that darn Davy was right - I wanted to impress Bruce. Even if he *was* pissed off at me for what I did with Davy. Then it occurred to me that making him jealous just might serve a useful purpose. As long as he didn't decide to be relieved I'd found someone else.

I wanted to hit myself on the forehead. This was getting very complicated. Maybe I should stick with buying magazines. At least those didn't talk back. Or walk away mad. Or play mind games. Or.. Davy nudged me, we were ready to begin. I was actually able to forget about Bruce and my feelings for awhile, as I swam and cheered on my teammates.

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There were five of us in the locker room when they came in. Ricky and Michael screamed, Davy grabbed my arm and Bryan just stood stock still. I sized them up and decided that right now I had no chance. Maybe once they were closer.. but those were semi-automatic rifles they were holding.

I heard a small part of my brain say it was glad I'd gotten dressed. It just wouldn't have felt right to be taken hostage and fight my way free, wearing only swim shorts. I didn't worry about that part of my brain, however. I was more worried about the men with the guns and what they were planning to do.

They herded us up against one wall. One man came forward and looked us over. "They'll do." He nodded and the four armed men waved those guns, telling us to walk slowly and carefully and make any sudden moves and you're dead. I didn't make any sudden moves, because I didn't want to get my teammates killed. I even told Michael to shut the hell up when he said we should try to overpower them.

Not to say I wasn't keeping an eye out. When we got into the hallway that lead off to the pools, to the parking lots and to other locker rooms I glanced around. No one else was around, but us nine. I worried for a second, then leapt into the air, spinning into a kick and yelling, "RUN!!"

I took two out and jumped for the others, hoping to just keep them down or off-balance long enough for the others to get away, out of range of those semi-automatic bullets. I prayed they wouldn't try to act like heroes, or worse yet, freeze in panic and make my effort wasted. I saw out of the corner of my eye Bryan, heading for me, when Davy just grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away, down the halls and through the nearest door. I whirled like a berserker, keeping them focused on me until I figured - hoped, they had gotten far enough away.

Then, of course, I was in serious trouble. Two men grabbed me, held me by the arms. Another pointed his gun at me making it perfectly clear that I should hold still. The fourth started down the hall, to catch my friends, but the fifth, unarmed man told him not to.

"We have to get out of here, before they can notify anyone."

I hoped like hell they notified Bruce. And not just because I loved seeing him in that suit. I had a feeling I needed rescuing in a serious way.

I had to let them drag me away, after tying a gag around my head and cuffing my wrists. I thought about reminding them I had feet, too, but knew that would probably get me killed. I let them drag me back down the hall and out of the building near the back entrances. They threw me into a van and we sped away. I watched them, still trying to figure out what they wanted.

I didn't know if they'd be so kind as to tell me.

We arrived someplace, somewhere, sometime later. It didn't make any difference that I had no clue, because I had hit the homing switch on my watch/phone. Bruce would find me no matter where they'd taken me. The same four men dragged me out of the van and two took me down into a basement and threw me in a small room with no windows and no furnishings beyond a cot, sink and john.

Lovely.

They stripped me of my watch, wallet, shoes, even my earring and neck chain. Then they ungagged me and with one guy carefully aiming a rifle at my head, uncuffed my hands. He kept aiming at my head until they had backed out of the room and slammed the door shut. I heard a very big lock click shut and then there was only an eerie silence.

I made a quick search of my room. No windows, no possible openings, nothing that could be used to strangle a guard. I could possibly use the cot to hit one or two, but it was rather flimsy and wouldn't do more than distract them. I kept it in mind, though.

I checked the door and discovered the lock was a very good one. It looked like I was going to have to wait until they came for me, maybe even took me out of the room. I went to the cot and sat down, to rest up for my chance to escape.

It might have been evening when I woke. For a moment, I didn't know what had woken me, then I heard the scraping again. I looked around and saw what - or rather who, was making the noise. A rat was searching the floor for crumbs or other useful items. I watched it, to see where it went - how it got in and out of the room. I didn't think it would be a space I could crawl through, but it made me feel better knowing I wasn't in an air-tight room. Maybe I could tie a note to the rat's neck.. I grinned. A homing rat. That's what I needed.

The rat made its way around the perimeter of the room, not caring that I was in there. It crawled under the bed, I leaned over to watch its progress. I flinched when two red eyes peered up at me, then I stuck my tongue out at it. "I ain't afraid of no rats!"

It went back about its business of searching my room. Then it scuttled away to the sink and slithered out through a hole where the pipes went through. I waited for it to get down along its way, then jumped up and checked the pipes. They didn't move very far, just enough to let a rat in and out. Too small for a robin. I went back to the cot and sat down. Eventually they had to do something with me and then I'd have my chance to escape.

I looked up when someone came to the door. My rat friend had returned earlier and was just sitting by the wall. The man at the door stuck something through the small barred opening and threw it to the ground. A sandwich hit the floor. Apparently the rat had been expecting this, since

it beat me to the food. I pushed it away with my foot, then broke off a corner of it and gave it to him. The rat ran off, no doubt muttering that it would have been happier with the whole thing.

I sat down on the cot, eating quickly. Maybe they would do something with me soon.

I woke up strapped to a chair. I looked around, groggy, and realized with dismay I had been drugged. Poor rat. I tried to focus my eyes and saw three figures standing around some distance away. They were talking and I tried to make out their words. At first I was worried that my brain was not functioning properly, then I realized they were speaking another language. I had no idea which one, even though I was fairly fluent in French and knew some Polish. This just sounded like gibberish.

I watched the men closely, trying to deduce their intentions I also tugged at my bonds and received a poke in the back of the head for my trouble. I looked over my shoulder and saw a muzzle. A small, round, metal muzzle which, if I annoyed the man holding it, would probably put a small, round, bloody hole in my anatomy. I stopped tugging.

A man walked forward and gestured to me. He was still talking to the other men, though. I decided to take some initiative. "What do you guys want?"

I got poked again, but otherwise ignored. The man in front of me kept pointing and gesturing and I suddenly felt like a car, or prize horse being shown. They guys looking at me had appraisingly expressions and I had a very sick feeling. The police had recently asked Batman to help them find a group of slavers, who had taken to kidnapping young men and women and selling them overseas.

I had a feeling I'd found them. I hoped Bruce found me before I got shipped off somewhere. With my watch gone, he might not be able to find me, at least not before I ended up in some rich pervert's mansion, locked in a room and taken out only to look nice for the guests. A couple of the kids who'd been kidnapped had been found - dead, washed up on two different countries' shores. Another had escaped and lived for almost a week, before dying of her injuries inflicted during a party - a private party. Her stories had been plastered across the newspapers and 'net, making almost everyone sickened and infuriated.

We'd been spending almost every night searching for hints, clues, but hadn't found anything. I smiled. Until now. I thought it ironic that Bruce had nixed my suggestion that I try to serve as bait, although his reasons had been good ones- the kidnappers had no pattern for their prey. No part of town, no general description. Just kids, ages 15 to 21.

I thought of the girl again and hoped Bruce would hurry.

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Days passed. At least it seemed like days. If I counted the number of times they'd fed me I'd say I had only been here two days, though. But I had a feeling I'd been here four - and that they were only giving me and Mr. Ratman a sandwich twice a day. I still had to race Mr. Ratman to the sandwich, even though by now he should have known that I would share it with him. Maybe he just wanted the whole thing. Rats can be like that.

I wondered where Bruce was. I had figured that he'd found my watch long before now, apparently the Bad Guys had tossed them someplace else. Either that or they'd beaten Batman..

I shook my head and let those thoughts die away. Couldn't happen. Well sure it *could* but it wasn't likely. And I would have heard *something*, surely, even if it was a guard making

snide remarks about a failed rescue attempt. I had to hope Bruce was out there somewhere, looking for me.

I knew he would be. I told myself, in those long stretches of hours when I didn't have Mr. Ratman to talk to, that Bruce would never give up until he found me. It didn't matter how he thought he did or did not feel about me, he knew I was his friend, his partner, his responsibility. He'd keep searching forever if that's what it took.

Of course, I rather hoped it would be sooner than that. I looked over and saw Mr. Ratman leaving. I told him it had been fun and if he felt like finding someone and leading them back to my cell that would be okay with me. I wasn't proud, I was willing to be rescued by a rat. I watched as he disappeared down the pipe hole and felt a stab of jealousy. He could leave any time he wanted, go anywhere and yet he kept returning to this lousy cell. Granted it wasn't a cell, to him. He could leave whenever he wanted. But why on earth would he come back? Well, the food of course.

I sighed and got up off the cot. Now that there was no chance of stepping on or scaring Mr. Ratman, I could distract myself with stretches, exercises. I was getting rather good at my Yang Long Form, able to hold the Wu-Chi position for what felt like a half hour. Who knew what it really was. I began my breathing exercises and ignored that scared little voice inside me that told me about how keeping in shape might increase my chances of being purchased by someone interested in a young healthy body.

Or it might make my captors deem me too dangerous. I let the voice wail silently, then let it subside and my thoughts cleared and subsided. I began my warm-up. Sometimes, in the midst of my tai-chi chuan, I felt at peace, even relaxed. Almost unscared.

It had been several days since they'd thrown me down here. Where was Bruce?

They took me out to the viewing room two more times. Once was an elderly woman, who seemed quite taken with my obvious attributes. But she decided she wouldn't be able to control me, when they made me flex my arms. I heard her telling the man in charge that her two trained attack dogs might get hurt, if I wanted to try and escape. Apparently she'd had that problem before and was here now getting a replacement.

I heard what had happened to the first and felt my stomach turn. I liked dogs, I really did. But after hearing how she had let them bury his arms and legs, gnawing the bones.. I began hoping fervently that Bruce would crash through the door Right Now and save me. The image of Dobermans eating a human stayed with me for the rest of my stay.

The second customer was another man, who hardly said a word as he looked me over. I'd been tied to the chair again, while they inspected me. I was beginning to get used to this and wondered how long it would be before I was sold into slavery and shipped off. We were pushing our luck that I would still be around by the time Bruce got around to saving me. If he had to search the globe.. well I was better off trying to save myself. One girl had done it. Surely I could.

Granted she'd been torn up by bullets and machetes. And she'd died. But still..

I couldn't tell if the last man wanted me or not, but after they'd looked me over I'd been dragged back to my cell, apparently to rot. Mr. Ratman was nowhere to be seen, so I practiced my back flips. If I stood with my toes to the back wall, I could do one without hitting the opposite wall. If I was too far out from the back wall I ended up slamming my legs into the concrete slab and falling to the floor.

Not fun. but it broke up the monotony. Just as long as it didn't break anything else I was great. I also amused myself thinking of ways to overpower two armed guards and maneuvering my way through an unknown maze, past an unknown number of armed guards to freedom. If I'd only had a penknife and some chocolate bars I might have stood a chance. As it was I merely kept Mr. Ratman amused. He seemed to find it hysterical that I was trapped here. Course he was just a rat; he might not have cared.

I *did* have a chance to thoroughly examine my situation. Not my 'trapped in a building being sold as a slave' situation, but my situation with Bruce. I'd talked it over with Mr. Ratman, and he agreed with me that I had to either get serious about pursuing him and convincing him he loved me, or let it go and concentrate on falling in love with Davy. I knew I could, if I wasn't so head over heels with Bruce. Davy was wonderful - fun to be with, cute as hell and he lusted after my body. At 17, I figured I shouldn't be asking for more than that.

But I was asking for Bruce. I was asking for a man, who had everything he could want, who had his life in complete order, to cast aside everything he believed about himself and fall in love with me. I was asking to spend the rest of my life with him. I was asking that he spend the rest of his life..

It probably wouldn't matter. If I got sold and eaten by dogs hen my life wasn't worth squat. Or maybe Bruce would rescue me, take a chance, then in a month decide he was wrong and toss me aside. Would he keep me on as his partner, then? Would he send me off to college and slowly forget about my love for him?

Maybe we'd settle down, adopt some kids and have a whole bat family, all running around calling Al 'grandpa' and making messes in more rooms than one house should have. Then again, maybe I was getting a little stir crazy. Mr. Ratman voted for the kids and grandpa. A lot of help he was.

Anyway, I settled on vigorously pursuing the object of my affection and either convincing him he loved me, or getting him so damn annoyed he threw me out of the house. With a smile on my face I leaned back and plotted. Roses, sure. Maybe those little chocolate creams he loved and rarely ate (gotta watch that figure.. those suits are hell to alter!). Maybe some bubble bath and massage oil..edible massage oil. OK, maybe that should wait for after I'd seduced him. Maybe I should stick with a jar of gourmet jelly. Or maybe I could fix that other Harley for him. Or..

I also constructed a bunch of poems which I would never in my life write down. But they felt good, sounded nice and showed me that I was probably a) a romantic, b) really, really in love, and c) not going to earn my living as a poet. Mr. Ratman was nice and didn't snicker when I tried some of them out on him. Then again his mouth was full of peanut butter and jelly.

I was almost glad I'd had a chance to sit back and spend a few days contemplating my circumstances, when they came for me again. This time he said he'd take me and I watched, terrified, as money changed hands right in front of me.

**********

"Matchmaker, matchmaker make me a match! Find me a find! Catch me a catch! Night after night I'm in the dark all alone so find me a match all my own!"

I tried beating my head against a wall, to get the song out of my head. I hadn't thought I'd remembered anything from the musical Bruce had dragged me to (society appearances were de riguer). I hoped I hadn't sung it aloud and I glanced over at the guards who were escorting me to

some other part of the building. It was nice to see new scenery. It was scary to see the lascivious???????? leers I was getting from the man who'd bought me.

Who'd bought me. The phrase rang in my head, spinning and coming to rest firmly in the middle of my thoughts. Bought me..this guy was going to treat me like he owned me, like he could what ever he wanted, use me in gods knew what ways. The images of dogs and machetes flashed again and for the first time in forever I felt frozen in fear.

The guards shoved me and I went tumbling along the hallway. It occurred to me that if I was going to die escaping, I'd rather it be before my new owner had a chance to so much as touch me. I continued my stumble forward and began running, ducking low around the corner ahead. Shouts followed me and I put on a burst of speed. I kept a sharp look for anything I could use, any route that might take me away from here safely.

I heard myself whispering for Bruce and clamped down on my tongue. I didn't need to give them another way to find me by tracking the sound of my prayers. I grabbed a bar as I sped by, jerking my arm nearly out of my socket but pulling myself into the small entranceway that had presented itself. It turned out to be some kind of service tunnel. I crawled ran along it, keeping silent hoping they would not think to look up after me but continue down the hall.

I wondered at the luck which had prevented them from getting enough of a view of my disappearing figure to fire at it. Gulping air I pushed myself up into the next junction of the tunnel, heading upwards. The roof. I was going to head for the roof. They would expect me to head for the ground floor, to get away from the building. They wouldn't think I could get away by the roof.

I hoped I could get away by the roof. I pressed my hands and feet into the metal walls of the tunnel and climbed. I could hear shouts echoing below me, bouncing off the walls from what seemed to be every direction. I knew I was dead, if they caught me. Shot through the head, one bullet and my brains would be all over the floor.

Normally that kind of thinking made my adrenaline run and gave me a crazy, determined kind of grin (at least according to Bruce). Right now I just felt scared. My legs would have been trembling, but I needed them right now. I pushed myself farther upwards, moving as fast as I could to be out of sight when they discovered I'd gone into the tunnel. Another junction came along and I took it away from the direction of the hall. I was at least two floors higher than I'd been.

It occurred to me to pray that I didn't come across any junctures opening into the hallways, framed with large angry men with guns. I felt like a.. rat in a maze. I hoped Mr. Ratman didn't mind me not giving him food anymore, but he was probably used to sudden disappearances of his human companions.

The tunnel opened upwards again and I scrambled into it. This one stopped quickly, at a catwalk. I shoved the grating to the side and peered out. Nothing moving, so I carefully and slowly crept out. I replaced the grate so they wouldn't know I had been here and picked a direction randomly. The catwalk didn't rattle as I moved, my second huge stroke of luck. All around me the place was dark with only strips of light shining across the railings, walls and floorways. I had no idea where I was, what part of the building I was in. I wanted to be outside where at last I could get my bearings and make a concentrated effort at escape.

Every slight sound made me freeze and wait for the noise to coalesce into a guard. It never did and I slid farther down the catwalk wondering where the hell the door to the roof was. A click and a slamming of metal against metal made me freeze again. Then the lights came on and far

down below me I saw figures scanning around them, holding rifles and semi-automatic weapons which could reach me without losing any noticeable velocity. I quickly searched the area above me for a door, an escape, but for now held still so they wouldn't be attracted to the rush of motion until I knew where I was going.

The rattle of gunfire sent me running even as I spied the door. I dodged and leapt across a space to another catwalk, grabbing the railing and landing firmly in the middle of the floorway. I kept running towards the door, sacrificing speed for avoiding a direct route. I heard a rush of air past my ear and told myself that later I would collapse, shaking, at the near miss. I headed for the door.

Something hit my heel as I jumped the catwalks again, to the one which sat right at the door. Just as I reached for it the doorknob turned and it swung open, towards me.

I saw a large, metal muzzle pointing at me. My hands went up of their own accord, for I knew surrendering wasn't going to buy me anything. I asked god, or somebody, to keep an eye on Bruce because he wasn't going to take this well at all. Then my knees collapsed and I hit the floor. I'm sure I heard laughter..

**********

What they say about your life flashing before your eyes must be true. It must also be quick, because I sure didn't have more than one second between the time I felt my knees buckle and the metal grating crash against my knees. But in that time, inside each micron of motion downwards, I saw a frame flashing, one after another, framing my descent in a long line of my life.

I saw Harry laughing, nearly doubled over, barely able to breathe as Gerry and I, each of us three years old, ran around wearing clown's shoes and makeup and maybe we were in suits as well, I didn't see. All I saw was Harry, laughing and I felt so happy that we'd made him laugh, made him happy. I didn't even know what we'd done, but it never mattered. From then on I'd always known how to make Harry happy.

I saw the first trapeze swinging towards me and I reached out for it. Somebody's hands were around my waist, holding me up. It wasn't my father, for he was across the way hanging from another trapeze, watching me. I grabbed the trapeze and felt the smooth round bar in my hand and felt for the first time the thrill of going out into the sky. My first flying lesson. All I did was hold onto the bar and let it carry me back and forth, towards my father's grinning face and back again into someone's waiting arms.

My father and several others cheered and I squirmed around in the man's grasp- Uncle Eric? and I heard my child's voice crying, "I wanna do it again!" I would have stayed there all day and all night, if my father hadn't finally called a halt to it so the other members of the troupe could practice. My mother tousled my hair and said I was a true artist. Then she picked me up and tossed me casually off the platform and I laughed and screamed as I went sailing into the net far below.

I saw the town kids, standing in a pack, staring over the fence that surrounded our camp-site. They were pointing and talking, and I saw for the first time the awe on their faces. Amused at things I thought were normal, everyday, plain and usual. And these kids, these kids who paid to watch us perform and then got to go back to their neighborhoods full of kids and fields and dogs and baseball were amused at it all.

I walked up to the fence to talk to them and they ran off. I stood there, grabbing the links of the fence, staring after them. It was a very long time before I understood why they'd run. And why they'd been so amused.

I saw another group of kids, standing around in a tightly knit pack, casting glances at me and my brother. We had gotten permission to inspect the creek nearby - another town, another state, I had no idea where we were. I hardly ever did, despite my mother's best attempts to give me some idea of geography. My brother was old enough to keep me out of trouble, so they said, and we had run off to be kids for an afternoon.

We'd spent an hour following the creek when we'd come across a water hole. There were about a dozen kids there, playing and swimming. They all stopped and climbed out, though, as we approached. One came forward and the others stood back watching. The kid who came forward asked my brother who we were and when he told them, they laughed, called us liars and threatened to beat us up. We had climbed the tree and done flips and swings off the tree branch to prove them wrong, prove we were members of the Flying Graysons, real trapeze artists.

After we'd show them, they said they didn't need strangers and circus freaks invading their water hole and chased us back towards the camp. It was a long time before either my brother or I asked to leave the campsite to explore the area. I think I was six.

There was the frame of my life that showed the girl who'd come up to me after a show, and given me something- I couldn't now remember what. And for days afterwards everyone had teased me about my first fan, about being the object of the girl's first crush. I remembered feeling confused and not understanding why they were so amused. My father told me when I was older and started noticing girls I would understand. When I was older, though, I realized I was confused for entirely different reasons.

My first kiss. Of course that would be one frame of the story of my life. Timmy, one of the kids who worked with us when we planted ourselves in one spot for a summer. He helped clean and fetch and carry and at night he and I would run off and watch the stars and talk. One time I asked him if I could kiss him and he'd said yes. After that, we'd run off at night and watch the stars and kiss.

Until my mom found out and informed me that I was too young to be unchaperoned. So we stayed around the camp in the evenings, where a hundred watchful eyes could make us paranoid and exasperated. When that month was over we made our good-byes and I never saw him again. And I noticed that my family started treating me a little differently. And of course I got 'that talk'.

I saw my first successful single flip. I saw my first successful double flip. I saw a thousand times my father's hand grabbing my own as I flew through the sky. I saw a dozen kisses with half a dozen other boys. I saw the boy I'd first made love to, awkward and scared and nervous and stupid and sweet. I saw the boy I'd first fallen in love with, awkward and scared and stupid and sweet. I saw the girls my brother had dated, the one I'd found him kissing behind the tent, the one he'd paid me money to find and tell he was interested in meeting.

I saw a single, frozen frame of my family standing together laughing. A frame of us standing on the platform, waving to the crowd below. The frame of them lying on the ground, dead. A frame of their funeral, a frame of me scattering their ashes into the sky.

I saw Davy, leaning forward to kiss me. I saw Al bringing me a cup of chocolate. I saw myself, under my blankets not wanting to crawl out of bed and face another day. I saw Bruce, sitting by the fire reading the paper. I saw him walking down the hall, away from me. I saw him

telling me to study, telling me to be home before midnight, showing me the bike I could fix, bringing me home after a fight had gotten the better of me, holding me when I cried for my family, throwing kicks at me during practice, standing in my doorway, cheering for me as I swam, smiling at me, frowning, yelling, waiting, crying..

The muzzle followed me down, pointing carefully and consistently at my forehead. The man behind the muzzle smiled and I made my decision. If I was going to die, it was not going to be at the hand of a slaver's guard. I pushed myself to my feet and jumped -- sideways, over the railing. I looked away from the armed guard and for a moment I was truly flying.

**********

I felt exhilaration in my soul, the freedom grasping me as I flung myself into the air. They could still shoot me and probably would, but at least I had made my own choice. I stretched my arms out and for a second could not feel the cling of gravity.

Then something hard slammed into me and I was sailing sideways. Instinct made me grab on and as I heard the rattle of gunfire following us I recognized the batsuited person who had caught me. My arms went around his torso, holding on tightly. He was holding onto a rope, swinging us across the open space between the catwalks.

"What timing."

Bruce didn't answer. I saw below us, the sprawled figures of men who'd been gassed. Bruce had fired something at the man in the doorway and though I couldn't see, I knew he had also been taken out of action. Within seconds the building was silent, then the sirens pierced the place and the shouts of cops swarming in replaced the thunder of bullets. I didn't have a chance to ask Bruce where we were going, for we'd reached the top of the rope's arc and we crashed through a glass window I hadn't noticed before.

I let go and rolled along the rooftop. A part of my mind asked if I had noticed the window earlier, maybe I could have escaped on my own. I told that part of my brain to shut up and stop second guessing myself. The room had been completely dark, I reminded it. Oh yeah, it said. Never mind, then.

I caught my breath and lay on my back, looking up at the sky. Then I heard a frantic voice saying my name and suddenly Bruce was pulling me up and asking if I was OK. I looked at him, and nodded. I wasn't sure the adrenaline had ebbed enough for me to speak. He'd saved my life before, but never.. I'd never chosen to die and then gotten a second chance. It had never been quite so close. It had never been a rescued by the man I loved.

I realized I was shaking and then Bruce pulled me towards him and was holding me, squeezing me against his chest and I heard him crying and whispering my name. I closed my eyes and leaned my face against the cool smooth surface of the suit, knowing that beneath was hot, sweating skin and a pounding heart. I put my arms around him and we held each other and I listened to Bruce's shaking voice say he'd been so afraid he'd never find me in time. That he wouldn't catch me in time.

I held onto him and tried not to think the same things. I felt him brush my hair and looked up to see him staring down at me. His eyes were wet and there was something behind that sheen of tears that I couldn't identify. Not until he pulled me towards him again and kissed me.

I wanted to collapse. *This* is what it took? Gee, if I had known I would have arranged something earlier. He pulled back and in spite of everything I smiled. Before I could say anything

I heard the police coming onto the roof. Batman stood up and helped me to my feet. I stood back, remembering to look like a kid who'd just been rescued from death, or fate worse than. It wasn't hard.

"We got everyone in custody, Batman. We couldn't have done this without you - thanks a lot."

"My pleasure." Bruce sounded brusque and only I knew it was because it was hard to talk when you'd been crying and then kissing the person you loved.

"We better get this young man home," one of the cops came towards me. Bruce turned.

"I'll take him home."

The cops nodded and headed back down to cart away the prisoners. One cop had gotten my name and said I'd be called to come into the station, later, probably in the morning. Then they vanished and left me and Bruce alone.

He looked at me, I waited patiently. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah. Nothing a warm bed and some hot food can't cure."

He smiled. "I think we can arrange that. Come on." He walked to the edge of the roof, and looked down. He glanced back at me and smiled, then fastened the cable to the rail and held out his hand. Really, there was no point in doing this, there were perfectly good stairs inside. I took his hand and stepped into his arms and we pushed off, sailing away, flying down to the ground.

First thing I did, when we climbed into the car, was pick up the phone. I called Al and proved to him I saw alive and well. The cops had called, but I knew he'd appreciate hearing me tell him I was OK and rescued. Then I dialed Davy's number and told him. Then I leaned back in the seat and stared out the window, letting the reactions finally catch up with me. I saw but didn't understand Bruce's expression, when I had spoken with Davy.

When we got home, Al was all over me, making sure I wasn't injured, asking me what I wanted for supper, directing me to take a shower. I did, while Bruce changed and showered as well. I put on my sweats and a T-shirt and realized how wonderful it was to be wearing clean clothes. Course it was also nice to be home. It was wondrously amusing that Bruce had finally kissed me back. I left my room, heading down for the kitchen.

We talked while we ate, I told them about the pleasures of Slavery Central, they informed me I'd been missing eight days and gave me a sketchy version of how they'd searched for me, found a bag of my stuff (including my watch) buried never the river and how they'd finally tracked down one of the leaders and located the warehouse I'd been held in. When I had eaten all I could hold, I pushed my plate away and said I was headed for bed.

"We are very glad you're home, Master Dick," Al told me, again, as I left the room.

"It's good to be back, Al." I headed upstairs. When I was standing outside my bedroom, I heard Bruce call my name. I stopped and looked over, watched him walk towards me. He looked uncomfortable and upset. "What is it?" I nudged, when he didn't say anything.

"I.. I'm glad you're home. I'm glad you're all right."

I grinned. "That's gotta be the twelfth time you've said that, Bruce."

"Yeah, well," he looked down at the floor.

My brain woke up long enough to tell me this was probably about the kiss. "Bruce.. did you want to talk about that kiss, earlier?"

For a second I thought he was gong to be relieved and say yes, then that damned mask fell down and he shook his head. "That was just.. reaction. I was just glad to see you were all right." He stepped away. "Have a good night's sleep."

He got three steps away from me when I found I'd had enough. I slammed my fist into the wall. He turned, startled and I finally, finally let him have it.

"Will you stop doing this to me? Making me think one thing, telling me another, and when I think you're finally ready to accept the fact that you love me you get all weird again and make me try and guess what the hell is wrong! I have had it! If you don't want to be in love with me than fine, that's your problem! But STOP MAKING IT MINE! I am sick of waiting, sick of pussyfooting around, sick of avoiding telling you how much it hurts to be in love with someone who tries to pretend you barely exist! You kissed me, damn it and if that wasn't because you love me then tell me so and let me get on with my life!"

I had been ignoring his shocked and frightened look during my tirade. When I was finished, I simply waited. I watched him try to find whatever words he wanted to say. I didn't dare pray they were the ones I wanted to hear.

"Dick.."

"Yeah?" The anger showed in my voice, but not the hope, not the fear.

"Does it matter how I feel? You've already gone and replaced me, you're seeing Davy. Why does it matter whether I love you or not?"

I wanted to collapse, again. Or beat my head against a wall. Or beat *his* against a wall. I had totally forgotten about mine and Davy's morning before the meet and forgotten about Bruce's jealous reaction. I settled for apologizing. "Bruce.. Davy is one of my best friends. What we did that morning.. was something between friends." I half-smiled. "We had to do *something* to avoid embarrassing ourselves. I know how he feels about me..but I don't feel the same way about him.

"I'm in love with you, Bruce. I have been for a long time. I probably will be for a long time to come. And I have been waiting to hear.. whether you were going to let yourself love me back."

He didn't say anything, but I watched his face change as he listened to me and realized the impact of *everything* I'd said. Then he stepped forward. "I'm sorry." He stood still for a moment, then I watched him fight himself for the courage to make the next move. I knew better than to make this one for him. I waited, calmly and finally Bruce raised his hand to cup my cheek. I strained to keep my delighted grin contained in a soft smile - didn't want to scare him off, not yet.

Bruce stared at me for awhile and I was beginning to seriously wonder if he was ever going to. Then he whispered, "Yes, Dick. I love you." And he kissed me.

Now I could collapse. I settled for holding onto him and kissing him back. It was a lot better than any of my dreams. His lips tasted so much better..

**********

Woo-hoo! It's over!

I smiled at him when he leaned away. After a second he smiled back and I could tell that he was nervous as hell. I wanted to laugh at him, because I knew it was going to be all right. But I didn't. Instead I let my hand fall and take his. I guided him after me, heading down the hall to his room.

This time I wasn't going to ask. I wasn't going to wait for him to make up his mind, decide if he was actually going to do this, whether he was really truly in love. All those things you tormented yourself with when you thought thinking was the only way to solve it. I took him to his room and led him inside and turned, and kissed him again.

Every muscle in his body was tense, I could practically feel him vibrating at my touch. I knew he was completely capable of saying the word 'no' so I continued kissing him and touching his shoulders, his arms, gently with my fingertips. I stayed back from holding him, not because I thought I could stand the tension of making this last, but because I didn't know if he was ready to feel real physical evidence of how much I wanted this. I put my hands on his face, feeling the soft skin and wanting, for a moment, to feel nothing else but the curve of his cheek and the brush of his slight beard, see the glint of his eyes as he watched me wondering how much and how far he would trust me.

He raised his hands and placed them carefully on my back, for a moment doing nothing but holding his hands in place. Then he slowly pulled me forward into an embrace. I slid my arms around him, the tension in me broke and washed over me as I felt the excitement filling me. Every fiber in my body was singing and I knew if I wasn't careful I would have him down and finished in ten seconds. I tried to take a deep breath and found myself devouring his mouth.

My hands roamed up and down his back, pushing him against me, digging at the fabric of his shirt, wanting to pull it away and feel his warmth against my hands. When my fingers brushed the top of his pants I felt him freeze, just barely, just for a moment. Then it was as if he forced himself to relax because every other part of him stopped moving. I was still kissing him, still pushing my tongue against the inside of his mouth but for a moment he wasn't returning my explorations. Then he slowly began moving again, touching me, holding me close. I kept my hands on top of his shirt and continued to pull him towards me.

He stepped back and looked at me and I could see the uncertainty in his eyes. I suddenly felt a pang of regret, of sympathy for him and wondered if I should give him the respect I'd demanded.

"Bruce.. would you rather wait?" I didn't want to, but he knew that. But I knew if he didn't want to, wasn't ready, then he would probably decide it was all some horrible mistake. I would much rather be patient with him.

He looked at me for a moment, his face unreadable. Then he quietly answered, "No. No I don't. I just.. am not sure of what I should be doing."

I smiled at him. This was going to be fun. I traced the curve of his cheek, looking into eyes I hoped to see staring at me like this for the rest of my life. He loved me, he trusted me and he wanted me. I could never ask for more. "All you have to do is relax and tell me what you

want. If I do something you don't like, say so. If you want me to do something, say so. It's really simple.."

He looked at me a tad dubiously. "That wasn't exactly what I meant."

"I know. But I'd give you the same answer." I kissed him softly, with my lips closed. I felt him relax and I placed my hands on his back again, holding him close. "May I remove your shirt?"

He nodded. "Yes." He stood still as I pulled the fabric loose from his waistband and pulled it carefully over his head. He stood very still as I put one hand on his chest, then gently let my hand fall, touching his skin, learning the feel of the body I desired. He quivered as my hand drew near his waist. I moved my hand to touch his back, briefly, then I removed it to take off my own shirt.

I stood quietly as he did the same for me, touching me hesitantly, carefully, as if he were afraid to show how much he wanted to touch me. He leaned forward and kissed my shoulder, and I held back a gasp. He kissed me again, halfway between my shoulder and nipple and then he moved his kiss closer.. then he leaned back and touched his finger to my nipple, softly tracing a circle around it.

He looked up at my intake of breath - and when he smiled at the expression I knew was on my face I wanted to yell. He left his hand on my chest and placed the other on the other side, brushing his fingers delicately over my nipples. I was about to rip his clothes off.

Instead I pulled him to me for another passionate kiss and placed my hands cautiously at the top of his pants. When he didn't tense I began unbuttoning them. I worked my hands inside the waistband, touching his waist, pulling him against me and I heard the way his breath caught, and shuddered. I pushed the pants down to his hips and put my fingers inside the band of his underwear, along his hips.

He grabbed me, suddenly enraged in arousal. He pushed me back and I fell onto the bed. He lay down on top of me and it was as if something inside him had finally clicked that he *did* know what he was doing, did know what he wanted and how to get it. He drew his hands down along my torso and pushed my sweat pants down. I lay mostly still, helping him only to get the pants out from under my buttocks, as he undressed me fully. He knelt on the bed, looking down at me and I felt an unreasonable flash of relief that I had worked out all my life, so he could enjoy the sight he beheld now.

He looked at me, saying nothing. I wanted to wriggle in delight, seeing him stare at me that way. I lay still, though, trying to maintain some decorum until he knew me a little better in bed. I didn't want to scare him by screaming.. He stepped back off the bed and removed the rest of his clothes and it was *my* turn to stare. I sat up, drinking in the gorgeous body that encased the man I loved. I saw a myriad of places I wanted to touch, kiss and explore. I wanted him so badly.. and he climbed back onto the bed, kneeling before me and kissed me.

He leaned me back, laying on top of me and for the first time I felt him touching me in all the thousand places new lovers discover when they press their bodies together. I shivered and Bruce responded by kissing me again, trailing his tongue down my neck, onto my chest and this time he touched his tongue to my nipple and I gasped.

I lay there while he explored my body with his hands and tongue, working his way over my chest and face, until I could stand it no longer. I pulled his head up to mine, kissed him softly, and put my hand over his. Gently I pushed his hand lower, watching his face, his eyes, letting him

know this was what I wanted and that he could stop me at any time. I placed his hand on my groin, kept my hand over his and e slowly closed his hand around me and brought his hand upwards.

I may have whispered a prayer, or a thanks, or some entreaty to whatever god was responsible for this. His touch was light, touching me in a way he'd never handled another man before. I squirmed under his touch and I knew it wouldn't be long.. I pushed my hips up towards him and grabbed onto him, wanting to hold him against me as I came. I wanted to feel him, to touch him everywhere and he lay down on me, slightly to the side and pressed himself against me as he rubbed faster, harder, responding to my body language. Or maybe it was the way I was moaning.

I wrapped one leg over his as I pushed myself into his hand and I came in a sudden, violent orgasm. I heard myself screaming, screaming his name, digging my fingers into his back and throwing my head back into the pillows. I felt my entire body tremble and then I was laying limply beneath him, feeling his mouth covering my chest and neck again, gently.

I moaned and leaned up to return the kisses. I followed the same pattern he had covered me with, guessing he had simply done to me what he himself enjoyed. I lay beneath him, kissing his chest and when he groaned I pushed him over, rolling him onto his back. I moved swiftly over his body, kissing him not just on the chest and neck but working my way down his stomach. I touched his legs, the inside of his thighs, getting closer and closer with both my hands and tongue. I touched him carefully, with one finger, stroking him up and down.

His eyes were closed and his breaths were coming in gasps. Keeping a careful watch on his face - mostly because I adored seeing the reaction to what I was about to do, I leaned down and kissed the very tip of his organ. I was rewarded with the most amusing expression of desire I had ever seen. I placed my lips on him again and slowly brought my tongue down the shaft and I could feel the muscles in his legs jumping under my fingers.

I quickly and expertly brought him off, licking him and caressing him with both tongue and fingers. Before long he was writhing at my touch and when he came he was almost completely silent, with only a soft moaning escaping his lips. I watched as his body went entirely limp and then he smiled. He raised his head and looked at me, and I wanted to scream again, or cry. I couldn't believe the look of happiness he gave me. He sat up and took me in his arms again and kissed me, wrapping his arms around me and I wondered if I would ever need him to let me go. He did let me go long enough for me to get a towel and clean ourselves off. Decorum, remember? Waking up covered in dried semen was not dignified.

Then Bruce leaned back, drawing me down with him and held me tightly. I didn't bother hiding the yawn that came and I heard him laugh. I moved sideways as he pulled the edge of the blankets down and we scooted underneath them. I felt him kiss me on the forehead and I felt as if I were flying in his arms. I fell asleep smiling, my head resting on his chest.

I woke up in his arms.

The End

# MERMAN SMILES

## BY
## JAMES WALKWITHWIND

I stayed behind the reef, watching the little sub-explorer swim through the water. It was a pretty one, coloured yellow and green. And it wasn't stealing anything, like the subs yesterday had been. It seemed to be one of those subs that just swam around and looked at everything. I swam along the reef, to watch where it would go.

And to keep it from seeing me.

I followed it for awhile, then heard another sub approaching. I ducked down into the reef and swam away when it was clear. I didn't wait to see what kind it was. Probably a friend of the first, cause the little ones usually swam in groups.

Then the explosion reached me. I heard and felt it, rolling me over and over. I grabbed a cliff, until the waves smoothed out. It had come from where the first sub had been - was it hurt? Had the other sub and it had a fight? From an explosion like that, it was probably hurt. Knowing I could keep hidden, I swam back towards it.

The other sub was leaving, quickly. I felt the ripples as it left, back the way it had come. Then I saw the first one, lying on its side on the floor. Its sides were all blackened and its tail was broken open. I waited, but it wasn't doing anything. It occured to me that its pilot might be hurt. Against the judgement I always said would get me into trouble, I swam towards it. I kept low to the floor, letting the plants disguise me. There weren't any other fish, they were long gone. Not surprising. Fish were sometimes a lot smarter than I. I went to the tail, first and looked around.

It wouldn't be swimming anywhere. Its tail was all busted open and water was going inside. The part that sometimes unattaches from the sub was missing or destroyed. So the pilot was trapped, unless the sub had another way to swim. I made my way up towards the face, so I could check. It had been such a pretty sub, too.

I found the face and looked in. The lights were still on and I could see one pilot lying on the floor. He looked hurt, I could see blood on his head. What was I going to do? Then he started moving. I watched him sit up and feel his head. From his expression I knew it hurt. But he stood up, holding onto the sub's insides and walked towards me. He looked up and stopped.

Stared at me. He blinked a couple times and felt his head again. He shook his head slowly and then sat in his seat. Still staring. He didn't seem to notice that the water was getting into this part of the sub. I pointed behind him.

Slowly he turned and looked. He saw the water gushing in and stood real fast.. and swayed, almost falling. He turned around again and began doing things to the panel in front of him. I watched him for a few moments, then he slumped back, looking discouraged. He looked back up at me and I saw his mouth moving. He hit the panel, real hard and then sat still, not trying

to do anything about the water. I pointed again. He couldn't breathe underwater, didn't he know that?

He glanced over his shoulder, saw the water, then just nodded at me. His mouth moved again and he stared at me. Fine. I guess I'd have to rescue him, if he couldn't rescue himself. I put my hand over my mouth and tried to imitate the divers' air mask. He looked at me funny, then breathed, real deep and covered his mouth. I smiled. He stood up and walked back towards the water and got something out of the sub's side. It was a divers' tank and mask. He held it, looking at me funny, then all of a sudden his face got excited. He pointed to me, then behind him somewhere.. oh, back the way he'd originally come. I smiled and motioned him towards me. He started to walk forward and I frowned. Then he grinned, sorta and did some stuff to his covers, and put the tank and mask on.

He motioned towards the side of the sub and went over to a door. I swam around and found the little circle that opened into it. Pretty soon it started spinning and it opened. The pilot was there, swimming out. When he got free of the sub, he stopped and was staring at me again. Then he started curling up and I realised we were probably too deep for him. I grabbed him around the waist and started swimming upwards. He tried to do something, he was moving against me, then he stopped.

I glanced at his face and his eyes were closed. I was already swimming as fast as I could, but I held on a little tighter. There was a good place, not to far away, a little island practically out in the middle of everywhere. A place with air.

The cave was dry, even though the entrance was underwater. I pulled the pilot up onto the sand, out of the water completely. I'd changed into my legs and sat beside him. He was asleep, so I took the tank and mask off him, trying not to hurt him. His head was still bleeding, so I looked around his covers for a small piece. There was a piece in his pocket and I squeezed the water out and almost held it against his head when I remembered ocean water hurts bleeding pilots and divers. I got up and climbed over the rocks, upwards, to the reason I'd brought him to this cave.

There was a spring of clear water in the back of the cave. I washed out the piece of cover, in a hole I made in the sand so I wouldn't get the clear water salty. I went back and used the mask strap to tie the cover to his head. He still wasn't moving, though. I shook his shoulder, but he didn't wake up. He was breathing, though and I could feel his heart beating. I put my hand on his middle, wondering if the deepness had gotten him too bad. The muscles were tight, but not too much. Maybe he just needed to sleep. Maybe it was because he'd hurt his head.

I sat beside him and watched him. He slept awhile, before ever moving. Then I heard him moaning and he woke up. I didn't move, as he sat up and felt his head. It still hurt, from his expression. When he felt my bandage, he looked up suddenly. He gave me a strange look, especially when he saw my legs. Then he said something. I smiled.

He looked around, still saying things. He looked at me again, but I just smiled again. Then he sat back and seemed confused. He looked over at his tank and mask and when I saw the mask I realised I could use it. I picked it up and ran up into the rocks, to the spring. I heard his voice, loud and quick behind me, but I didn't hear him stand up. I filled the mask with clear water, after cleaning it off and carefully carried it back to him.

I knelt beside him and held it to his mouth. He looked at me and tasted it. Then he smiled and drank the whole mask full, at once. He said something and when I didn't answer, he

pointed up the way I'd gone. I smiled. He looked down at the ocean water, then up and suddenly smiled. He made noises and stopped once or twice and made noises again after each pause. I just watched him. Then he sat back and started pointing. He gestured at the ocean, then down, and the sand and above us. When I just stared, he stopped and tried again. Suddenly I realised.. he thought we were on the shore!

I smiled, to let him know I understood, then frowned. I pointed to the ocean water, then all around us. He seemed to understand, because he looked sad. He indicated the mask and cocked his head to one side. I poked my finger in the sand and pointed to the clear water in the mask. He smiled, made his noises and seemed sad again. I picked up the mask and stood up. He looked at me, then bounced his chin up and down. I took that for a smile and went to get more clear water.

He drank half of it, then stopped. He tried to offer me some, but I smiled and pushed it towards him. He made his noises again and set the mask down after another drink. I sat, watching him. He watched me right back, still making his noises. He felt his head a couple times, it was still hurting him. I scuttled over, once, to check it. It wasn't bleeding anymore, so I smiled at him. He only half-returned it, but then it was his head and it didn't hurt me.

He'd been getting thoughtful and hadn't said anything for a bit. Then he looked at me and started saying something again. He stopped, apparently realising I wasn't understanding. He put his chin in his hand and thought about something. He said something and pointed to himself, and then straight up. Oh! He was trying to figure out how to get home! I smiled. I pointed to the ocean water. The way out was that way.

He shook his chin back and forth, looking sad and indicated his tanks. He made a motion across his neck which I didn't understand. I looked at his tanks and he showed me a white round face. A little black stick was resting, on the left side. I looked at him. He made another strange motion. Hmm. I pointed to the tanks and made a 'floating upside-down' gesture with my hand. He stared at me funny, then smiled, bouncing his chin. Aha. He had no air to swim with.

I sat back and thought. Then I smiled and drew a picture in the sand of a sub. He watched, then shook his chin. He copied my floating hand gesture and indicated the sub. I frowned and drew another picture, of his sub, with the tail all open. I pointed to it, then him, then put my hand beside the first one. He made a loud noise, smiling. He made his noises, fast and happy sounding, but soon stopped.

Then he sat back and started a series of pointings. He indicated his tanks, himself and shook his chin, frowning. Ok, he couldn't leave here, I knew that already. He pointed to the first sub and made a looking gesture and pointed to himself, while frowning. Ohh.. the other sub wouldn't be looking for him? He moved his shoulders and hands upwards. I looked at the pictures. Then smiled.

I pointed to myself, made the looking gesture, then at the sub. I could go look for a sub. He smiled and started to bounce his chin, then stopped. He pointed to his tanks, then at me, frowning. I smiled and would have giggled if there'd been any water in my throat. I made a deep breath gesture and smiled. I could breathe fine. He didn't look convinced, but I could go look without his understanding. I started to go for the ocean water.

He scrambled after me and grabbed my arm as I stopped and looked back at him. He motioned me back to the pictures. What now? I followed and he pointed at the first sub, frowned, and moved his shoulders up. Making noise, as well, which didn't help. He erased the picture suddenly and began drawing a different one. It was longer and looked much different. He pointed to me and indicated I should look for it instead of the first sub. I smiled. Before I could get up, he

drew again, a tiny little sub next to the one he'd just drawn. Then he pointed from it to the sub he'd been in and back.

My eyes got wide. I pointed to his sub, made tiny hands, then at the other and made big hands. He smiled and his chin bounced. My gosh, he wanted me to look for that HUGE sub! I pointed to him, then it. He bounced his chin, making noises. When I didn't move, he began getting upset. I smiled and stood up. Ok, I'd go look for it, then. And I'd have to figure out a way to get him home, without showing myself to ALL those pilots.

I climbed into the water and waved to him. He smiled and waved back. I faked taking a deep breath to assure him and dove down. I let the air rush out of my lungs as soon as I got out of the tunnel and changed my legs back and swam out.

Where would his sub be? I hadn't heard it in a while, but he'd had to have come from it. I headed back to his sub that had crashed and then headed the direction I'd seen him going from. I didn't find it, but I looked until I figured I'd better head back.

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Back in the cave I found the pilot curled up in the sand, shaking. He was lying below the rocks that led to the clear water. The mask was on its side, empty of course. I didn't know if he'd emptied it, or had dropped it. I crawled up next to him and tried to roll him over. He woke up and grabbed my arms, looking confused and scared. I helped him sit up and he looked at me, the cave, and started calming down. I picked up the mask and gestured towards the clearwater. He bounced his chin, but wasn't smiling. I didn't know what that meant, but figured it couldn't hurt to bring more clearwater.

I was back quickly and he drank it all. I gestured, asking if he wanted more and he bounced his chin again. I went and got some more and he drank half of it. I tried to get him to finish it, but he didn't, shaking his chin. I sat down beside him, pulling him away from the rocks, becuase he was still shaking and the rocks were probably cold for him. He leaned up against me, and he WAS cold. He seemed to feel it, too, because he huddled up against me real close. I held him, keeping his skin away from the rock and as much against me as I could. I was a lot warmer than he was, but I'd just come out of the oceanwater. Even cool, though, it felt like I'd be warmer than him.

I heard him fall asleep, leaning against me. I sat where I was and kept him warm, trying not to move. I fell asleep after awhile, but after I woke up he slept for a long time. When he woke, he was confused again but remembered where he was quickly. He moved away from me and said something. I smiled. He smiled back. I pointed to the place I'd found him and cocked my head to one side. He grinned and pointed up at the rocks, and mimicked holding the mask, full of clearwater. Then he made rolling motions with his hands. He fell? I started smiling and he grinned wider, moving his shoulders up. I grinned and he shook his head slowly back and forth. I smiled, like I do at myself when I've done something stupid (that didn't hurt much) and leaned over and kissed him on the unhurt side of his head. Silly pilot.

As I leaned back, he was smiling at me differently. He said something and I just looked at him. After a moment he stood up and started walking.. and stopped by the big sub. He pointed, spinning around to me and I frowned, covering my ears. I hadn't found it. He looked confused, then bounced his chin slowly. Said something. He walked back to where the mask was, drank the rest and while holding it, looked back up at the rocks. I stood up and took the mask and climbed up to get him more.

I heard him make a sudden noise and looked back. He motioned to me, as he crouched by his tanks. I climbed back down and walked over to watch. Soon he was holding up part of his tank.. and turned it upside down. It was open on the bottom.. a perfect clearwater holder! I smiled and took it as he handed it over. I climbed up with it and filled it.

It was trickier climbing down, but he grabbed the tank as soon as he could reach it and set it down. He used the mask to scoop water out and drank some. He smiled and pointed to the roof with his thumb. I looked up, not understanding. He made a fast, light noise and when I looked down at him he was laughing. I smiled.

We spent some time just sitting in the cave. He kept making noises, one after another. I decided he was talking to himself. After awhile he opened his mouth real big and stretched. He scooted down and lay down on the sand. I crawled over. I pointed to the sub, then pointed to himself and made shaking motions with my shoulders. Which did he want? I cocked my head to the side.

He looked from the picture, to me and back. Then he pointed to the sub. I smiled and when he lay down I leaned over and kissed his forehead and placed my hand on his head. He smiled and closed his eyes, saying something. I went back to look for his sub.

**********

I had tried another direction, stopping to eat along the way, but came back after not finding anything. He was still asleep when I climbed onto the sand. I felt his skin, but he didn't seem as cold. He wasn't shaking, anyway. I yawned and laid down beside him to sleep. I felt him roll over and his arm rested on my chest. I smiled as I fell asleep.

He woke up before I did. I opened my eyes and saw him sitting beside his tank of clearwater. When he saw me sit up, he smiled, eagerly, pointing to the sub. I frowned. He lost his smile quickly and looked down at the sand. He looked sadder than he had before. He didn't say anything or even move much for a long time. Then he looked over at me and started talking. He really seemed sad, he wasn't smiling at all and occasionally he'd look confused or upset.

I watched him and tried to figure out what to do. Suddenly he said something that sounded different. I looked at him, cocking my head. He pointed to himself and said something. He repeated it, slowly. Pointing to himself all the while, as he repeated it again. He was trying to tell me his name! I smiled. He returned it and said the sound again, slowly. I crawled over and watched carefully.

Then I tried the first part of the long, funny sound. "Bbhuuh"

He grinned and repeated just that sound. After a couple tries, I made a 'Buh' sound like his. He smiled and made another sound. "Eh."

"Aueh." He grinned and repeated it until I said, "Eh." We went through every sound he'd made in his name and then he said the whole thing. I tried and got through it halfway a couple times. He kept repeating it, slowly and I said it- "Benjamin."

He grinned and his chin bounced again. He said it, pointing to himself. I said his name, pointing to him to let him know I knew what it was. Then he pointed to me. I smiled and clicked my name.

He gave me a goofy look and tried to repeat it. I laughed and tried to frown. I calmed down and repeated it. I did with him what he'd done with me, but his clicks kept wandering all

over the scale. He said some wierd things, trying to say my name. We tried for a while and finally he shook his chin and said something.

"Benjamin." I said it, to remind him I hadn't quit. He raised his hands, saying something, sounding.. amused. I grinned. He said something, interspersing clicks of ALL sorts among them. I began laughing and soon he was too.

When we stopped, he said something, cocking his head. Then he said a sound and smiled. He pointed to himself said Benjamin, then pointed to me and said a sound. Oh, he was naming me in his language.. something he could say. I smiled. I didn't mind. He said it again, firmly. Then he leaned back, folding his arms and looked at me. We spent more time like that, he tried to teach me some other sounds, pointing at the oceanwater and the tank, the mask, but soon I couldn't figure out one sound from the next. And repeating them was confusing my ears. Soon I just said, "Benjamin." I sat firm, hands over my ears, frowning almost. I wasn't going to say anything else. He smiled. And said something. But it wasn't to repeat, so I grinned at him. Then I thought maybe I should looking again and started to stand up. He looked up, suddenly, frowning. I pointed to the sub picture and the oceanwater.

He frowned again and started to look upset. He tried to not look upset but he was. I walked over and squatted beside him, cocking my head. He kept saying a sound, but I frowned. I indicated the water again, didn't he want me to go looking? He said the sound again and put his hand on my arm, pulling me to him. His hands weren't cold, he had water.. what was wrong? Suddenly he was crying and holding my arm tight. I sat down and held him. He put his face against my chest and I felt him crying more. He was scared.

I held him to me, until he calmed down. Then he raised his head and looked at me. I smiled gently and touched his cheek, where the tears were. I tasted the water and smiled. Oceanwater! I pointed to the clearwater and to his mouth, then at the oceanwater and to his eye. One goes in, the other comes out! He smiled and bounced his chin. He was still upset, but he did smile. I wiped his face, cleaning the salt water off. He said something, then started to lean his head against my chest again.

I put my fingers under his chin, though and raised it back to me. He looked up, confused and I kissed him. Once, short, just to make him feel better. He smiled slowly and looked at me quietly for awhile. Then, feeling my own blood beginning and feeling his skin start to get warm, I decided to kiss him again. He opened his mouth this time, I opened mine and we kissed each other.

I licked his mouth for a bit, then pulled back. I tugged at his covers. He grinned and began removing them. There were so many! The big one that went all over, then four little ones inside it.. not counting his boots. I stared at all the covers and heard him laugh. I smiled at him, and when he was as naked as I was, leaned forward and began kissing him again.

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We laid side by side, on the sand. I had my arm around Benjamin and he was snuggled up against me. He'd said something earlier, but I just smiled at him. He knew I didn't understand, why did he keep saying his sounds? I'd kissed him and he'd hushed. I listened to him breathe and realised he was falling asleep. These pilots sure slept a lot. I stayed still, until he'd fallen asleep. Then I carefully got up and went to the oceanwater. I looked back at him, then climbed into the water. I swam away quickly, to go searching for food and his sub, before he woke up again.

I knew I'd have plenty of time, he'd sleep so long. I ate and headed back to the crash site, to start again. On the way there I heard something moving in the water - something hugemongous! I quickly dove for the reef and snuck forward. It sounded big enough to be Benjamin's sub! Suddenly I heard something else.. a dolphin!

I recognised it, it was Darwin, who also lived on Benjamin's sub. I waited until he was closer and called out to him. He swam over and hovered above me, warning me to stay hidden, the sub had eyes out. I told him I had Benjamin safe. I asked him how he wanted to get him home. After some debate about how best to keep me out of the whole thing, he swam after me towards the cave. When he knew exactly where it was (and had an excuse for knowing where it was), he swam back for the sub. I went into the cave.

Benjamin was sitting on the sand at the edge of the water, staring at me. I climbed out of the water, but he was staring.. downwards, and making his noises. He pointed at my legs and said something. Oh. He'd seen me change, or thought he had. He was slowly shaking his chin and saying something over and over.

I stepped forward. "Benjamin." He stood up and moved back, saying something. I started to follow him, but he began to get upset. Scared, again. I pointed to his sub and he stopped. He stared at it,and began to get excited. I smiled and pointed to the cave opening. He grinned. He started to say something, then stopped. He looked at me, again upset about what he'd seen. I carefully stepped sideways, to move away from the water without approaching him. He stayed back as well, keeping both ears on me. When I was near the rocks that led up, I sat down slowly. Looked up at him. He was free to go, I wouldn't hurt him, I was perfectly harmless.

He looked over at the water, then walked over and crouched in front of me. He looked at me, said something and then brushed my cheek. He leaned forward and kissed me. I kissed him back and when he wasn't paying attention.. hit the bandage with the rock I'd picked up. He fell forwards, asleep. I caught him and laid him on the sand. I quickly moved away, glad he'd gotten himself dressed again because I sure couldn't do it and crawled up the rocks towards the clearwater.

The sounds were moving closer, in the ocean and they'd be here soon. I glanced down at Benjamin, he seemed ok- asleep and he'd probably be hurting when he woke up - but by then he'd be home and the other pilots could help him. I hoped that his head injury would explain away any strange things he thought he'd seen. Maybe he'd think he dreamed it all, or he might forget. I hid myself in the spring's cave, in the other place where the oceanwater came in and provided an escape. I listened to the approaching divers. Darwin was with them, I heard him call out. I didn't answer, but I knew Benjamin would be ok, now. I swam away some and waited as they took Benjamin out and got in a little sub and swam away. Darwin called back at me that Benjamin was safe and thanks, and he'd see me later and let me know how Benjamin was.

I still didn't answer, not wanting them to hear me.. I don't sound like a dolphin, even when I speak their language. I waited until the sub was going away and then I curled up against the rocks and started missing him.

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A lot of days later (the tides had changed again) I met Darwin in the waters near the edge of the farms. I stayed well back, until I heard him swimming around. I called out to him, and he swam up and met me. I asked him about Benjamin and Darwin said he was fine, head all healed (hard head, Darwin said). And Benjamin told Darwin to tell me something. I blinked, and asked

what. "Tell you, 'Benjamin understands. Benjamin not say anything, Benjamin ok head. Thank you. Hopes you ok.'"

I smiled. Benjamin understood? He wasn't mad! I told Darwin thanks for telling me. We played some after that, tag mostly. I told Darwin he was bottle-nosed, he told me I had weed in my head. I said he couldn't swim any faster than a tortoise, he accused me of being dumber than a stone crab. I tagged him when he wasn't listening and he tore out after me. I am faster than him, though and got away easily. I had to duck once, though, because I heard a harvester approaching. It was the kind without pilots, but I hid anyway.

Darwin started to tell me I was a scardy-fish, when he yelled. I yelled back what was wrong and he started screaming that a fire net had caught him. Those were painful! And worse, I couldn't get him out of them! The charge would hurt me as bad. I swam over, saw him trapped inside a huge electric net. There were no pilots around, so no one was going to free him soon. I asked him how much air he had.. and he didn't have enough to wait for a pilot or diver.

I swam around the net, looking for anything helpful - but it was all electrified. I told him to wait, not touch the net and I'd be back and get him out right away. Then I swam off, towards his and Benjamin's sub.

I found one of their little whiskers, Darwin called them. It was much closer than the sub.and from what Darwin had said, was just more ears and eyes for the sub. I swam up to it and began tapping it on the head.

It didn't respond, then it turned, until part of it - the face, was pointing at me. I gestured towards where Darwin was, trying to get it to follow me. I swam off aways and gestured again. I had to approach it again, and swim off towards Darwin again, before it began following. I swam as fast as I could, back to Darwin. It kept up fine. When we reached the net, I pointed, but it appeared to be hearing everything. It swam a little closer to the net and an arm came out of its body and cut through the net. The electricity wasn't hurting it at all, I guess it was immune.

When it had a space cut big enough, I swam past it and went to Darwin. He was almost out of air and his back had gotten burned. I took in a lungful of water, made some oxygen and tapped Darwin's airhole. He let go and I blew the air inside. He felt better, he said, but he still wasn't up to swimming all the way back. I got my arms around him and carried him out of the net. I motioned for the whisker to go back to its home and I started swimming, sideways, taking Darwin back to the sub. The whisker paced me the whole way, one little ear or eye pointed at me.

I thought about gesturing at it, but figured I couldn't spare the drag. I was scared, though. I was about to be seen by a whole bunch of pilots. But Darwin needed help. I held him gently and I heard the sub ahead of us. The whisker darted out and led us to a spot on the sub's side. Darwin said it was a entrance to swim into, so I did. The doors opened and I swam right in, leaving the whisker outside. Darwin directed me down the water-filled tubes, to a place filled with pilots and a half-open pool of the water. As I got Darwin close, two divers got him and took him to the side. Darwin said they were going to heal his burns, so I didn't try to stop them. I was going to turn around and go back, when I realised I'd heard the doors close behind us. I started swimming slowly backwards, wondering how I was going to get out, when I thought I saw someone familiar. I cleared my lungs,and came up out of the water, to about my chest. I smiled.

"Benjamin!" He was standing beside the pool, smiling at me. The other pilots all started saying things, all together it seemed. I looked up at them all and began to think I was going to be very, very scared in a moment. I heard Darwin tell me not to be, though and I told him I'd try. Benjamin and the others were very quiet, then Benjamin picked up something and spoke into it. And the walls translated it into Darwin's language!

Darwin said, "Walls talk dolphin."

Benjamin looked at the other pilots, and spoke again into the thing he held. The walls said, "Can you understand me, Matt?"

"Yes, I can understand.. the walls, not you."

He laughed. "Lucas build the translator into the walls, so we can talk with Darwin." I moved over and he held out the thing in his hand. I reached out and he let me touch it. I looked up at him, confused.

"What's this?"

"It's a receiver. It takes what I say and sends it to the walls."

"The walls must/are smart." He laughed.

"Matt, what happens? How does Darwin get trapped?"

"He isn't listening where he's going--"

Darwin interupted. "Watching Matt swim." Like it was *my* fault?

I explained, "We are playing tag. He's chasing me. I guess it comes up behind him, or something. There aren't any pilots around. Your whisker is the closest thing to us."

I heard the pilots all talking to each other, then one took the receiver from Benjamin. "My name is Captain Bridger. I.. want to thank you for bringing Darwin in.. he's a friend of mine."

I grinned. "He's a friend of mine, too. That's why I bring him." Even if it meant me being trapped.

Captain Bridger looked nervous, like he was trying to figure out what to do. "Matt.. I don't know how to say this, but.. well, we are never seeing a real merman, before."

"Benjamin sees."

"Yes, but he doesn't say anything about.. you, until now. Matt.. will you like to stay on board the SeaQuest, for awhile, so we can.. ask you some questions, maybe.. we can learn something about each other. Matt, are there more mermen out there?"

I looked up at him, over at Benjamin. It'd be nice to stay with him, for awhile, anyway. But I frowned. Did I want a bunch of pilots staring at me? Well they were already staring at me. "Can you.. turn the walls off, so I can talk to Darwin?"

"Of course," and he did something to it. He spoke and the walls stayed quiet. I nodded and went under to get a better voice. I asked Darwin what he thought.

"Bridger friend. Nice ship, nice pilots."

"Is it safe for me to stay? Will they cut me up and put me in baggies?"

"No cut friend. Darwin tell Bridger no cut."

"Yeah, but what do you think they want to do?"

"Darwin think Bridger want to talk. Learn Matt. See Matt real."

"I'm real. Well.. if you're not worried."

"Trust Bridger." I said ok, and went back up.

I motioned for him to turn his walls back on. "Darwin says I can trust you. Are you let me go?"

"Of course we're letting you go. You're a guest here. And you don't have to agree to anything you don't want to do." He turned around, to one of the pilots and I decided if I was staying I'd better get out of the tank. I got my legs and stood up, walked to the side of the tank and sat on the edge, to climb out. The pilots were staring at me, except Benjamin who was only looking. I got out of the tank and stood on the sub's floor. It felt funny, but I figured it was cause it was a machine. Captain Bridger was staring and trying to talk to one of the pilots. Benjamin gently touched my arm.

I looked over. He smiled and tugged on his covers. Captain Bridger handed him the receiver. "If you're wearing legs you ought to wear covers, as well. Otherwise people are/are staring."

I gave him a funny look. "Benjamin, pilots are already staring. They're never seeing mermen before- with or without legs."

Bridger stepped over and the walls said, "You're more comfortable, we'll lend you a cover."

I shook my head. "I'm ok in legs."

Benjamin grinned. "But *we* are more comfortable if you're in covers. Pilots aren't used to seeing naked bodies outside of the enclosed home."

"Or caves?" I asked. His face turned lobster red and he grinned. "Ok, I can wear covers if you want me to." I told him. Captain Bridger said something to another pilot. I looked over at Benjamin. "I'm sorry about your head."

He grinned. "That's all right. It's all healed."

"Yeah, Darwin says you have a hard head." I saw Darwin and knew he heard me. He started to call me back, but a pilot told him to hold still to heal his burns. Benjamin was staring at Darwin, too.

He looked like he might have said something, but Captain Bridger was holding some covers for me. I took them, but had no idea-- Benjamin took them out of my hands and shook them- and they became longer, like his. He held them down and I heard the walls telling me to put my legs inside the covers. Benjamin helped and we got me wearing covers. I stared down at myself- all covered up! Wierd! I smiled at Benjamin.

I heard the walls say, "I suppose.. would you like a tour of the ship?" I looked at Bridger.

"I don't know 'tour'."

Benjamin said, "Would you like us to show you around the inside of the ship?"

"Oh.." I looked down. "Is Darwin ok?"

Some pilot I hadn't heard before said, "Yes, he is/is fine." I smiled and walked over to the side of the water and flicked my fingers in the water. Darwin flicked his tail back, not having a tongue to stick out at me.

I went back to stand by Benjamin. "Ok. 'Tour'." He grinned and took my hand, and we walked away from the water, into his ship. The Captain walked in front of us, another couple pilots walked behind us. The Captain walked into his sub, leading us away from the water paths. I decided not to worry- if I never found my way out, well- it wouldn't be the first time I'd done something stupid, eh?

The Captain went through a door and Benjamin took us in, and he sat down on a bench, pulling me down beside him. The other pilots sat down across the room...and it started moving! I squeezed Benjamin's hand tight, else I might've fallen. I stared at the walls-- this sub had some strange walls.

Benjamin was saying something, but the walls weren't making sense. "The sub is moving."

"I know the sub is moving. Where are we going?"

Benjamin laughed. "No, not the sub. The.. it's a room inside the sub. It's taking us to the head of the sub."

I just nodded. They hadn't even had subs the last time I was upwater - I shouldn't be surprised that they can have subs in subs. It stopped and we got out. The pathway looked the same. Where were we on the sub? It suddenly occured to me I was lost. I looked up and down the path. "Matt, are you ok?"

I looked at Benjamin. "I think I'm lost."

He showed me his teeth. "Don't worry. I know my way around- if you need to find something you can ask me."

"Then I better not lose you either." He laughed. I decided it was nice to be lost if it was making Benjamin laugh. We followed the Captain into the head of the sub.

The Captain starting pointing around at his sub's head. There were a lot of strange things in it - lots of lights, chairs, pilots, things which made little sense. The Captain wasn't making much sense either. The walls kept leaving blank spots, or saying sounds which were just sounds. Finally I looked at Benjamin and frowned.

"What's wrong, Matt?"

"I don't know what you're saying to me."

The Captain and Benjamin looked confused and another pilot- a young one, spoke up. "The translator is using Darwin's words. Matt may not understand what we're saying if he's hearing another language."

Benjamin looked at me. "Matt, do you speak Darwin's words?"

I furled my eyebrows. "Sure I speak dolphin. They can't talk mer, so we learn their words."

"Are there words in dolphin that you don't have..for?"

I stared at Benjamin. "Don't have what for?"

He tried again. "Ideas. Mind words."

"Oh! You mean is there a word to word from dolphin to mer? No. We say a lot of things dolphins don't say. But dolphins know a lot more."

He smiled. "So we're saying through three words."

"Yes." I nodded. From mer to dolphin to pilot. It was no wonder we were getting me confused.

One of the other pilots asked, "Can we get some of your words recorded? We can start building a store of mer words.. maybe we can translate directly."

"It is faster for me learning to talk pilot... but I can talk mer, if you want."

Captain smiled. "Matt, why do you call us pilots? We aren't all pilots, you know."

"Pilots are in subs.. divers aren't. You are in a sub, you're pilots. What else are you?" I flicked a few fingers to shrug. Did it matter?

He smiled. "We call ourselves pilots."

I grinned. Then I laughed. They were all looking at me funny, until I explained. "The walls say you call yourselves what I call you." They laughed too, once they figured out what that meant.

The Captain tried again. He ended up saying a sound that didn't make much sense- it was the same kinda sound that Benjamin's name was out of, but only had two in common. I just looked at him, and didn't try to figure it out. "Well, we can worry about it not now."

The young pilot spoke up again. "Can we go down to the..and record some of his words? I want to see how they compare to dolphin."

The Captain smiled. "Alright, Lucas. Since showing you the sub head doesn't seem to be working out well.. you don't understand most of what I'm saying about it. Is that all right with you?" I smiled. He returned it and said, "It's this way." He lead us out of the sub head. Benjamin was still holding my hand- I was feeling I'd be happy to tour all day, if he stayed with me. We went into the moving sub in the sub again and came out at another pathway.

The Captain, Lucas, Benjamin, another pilot and I all went into a room with a bunch of white floors, steppes, and pictures of ocean animals. A female pilot walked over. She held out her hand, "I'm Healer Kristen Westphalen."

I held out my hand and she shook it. "Hi. I'm Matt." The walls were turning my name-click into a sound, the same one Benjamin had given me.

That made me feel like giggling. But I didn't, since I wasn't sure they'd understand mer mating rituals. I let them lead me to a place and Benjamin asked if I wanted to sit down. I did so, since he did, next to me. The young pilot was talking faster than the walls could keep up with. Finally he turned to me. "What I am/am doing, is saying a word, and I am wanting you to say the mer word for it. If there is more than one word, say them all, is that good?"

I smiled. "I can do that." It was like arguing with an octopus- one word on each side until one left in a huff. The pilot bobbed his chin and began making some of the smaller machines do things. I decided he wasn't ready yet and turned to Benjamin. "What does that chin moving mean?"

"What?" he seemed confused.

"You keep bobbing your chin up and down," I demonstrated. "What is that for?"

He smiled. "It means yes, or agreement, or.. being satisfied with something the other person has said or done."

"Oh." I went back through all the times he'd bobbed his chin at me, there in the cave. I smiled. "Oh! Now it makes sense. The time you are frowning, but bob your chin, I can't decide if you are meaning yes or no. You are meaning yes."

He smiled. "I don't remember, but it sounds right."

I was going to say more to him, but the young pilot came back and held a small black thing in front of me, then set it on a steppe in front of us. "All right. This is the ear, it will hear what you say. I'm going to start with easy thing words, the ones Darwin is most easy learning. Good?"

I tried bobbing my chin. Benjamin laughed and smiled. The other pilots were watching. The young pilot sat down facing us and said a word. "Ocean water." I clicked back for the sea water, not clarifying it as to distance from surface or temperature. The young pilot asked, "Is that the only word?"

I sorta frowned. "It is only one word, but it is having lots of qualifiers. When I am saying it to someone, I don't say only 'sea water'. I am saying 'warm sea water near the surface' or 'cold sea water almost near the surface' or 'cold dark sea water at the ground'. That is what makes the word necessary to say." I mean, why talk to someone about sea water, unless you needed to tell them something?

The young pilot bobbed his chin - said yes. "That makes sense." he did something to his machine and said another word. "A Dolphin."

"Who?" I said it in dolphin. I wasn't sure if he meant Darwin or not.

"It doesn't matter who. Just the word for any one."

"But they don't have words, they have names."

"What if you don't know the dolphin's name?"

"I ask."

The other pilots laughed at the young pilot, who tried again. "Do you have a word for a dolphin, which isn't one of their names?"

"No." I frowned.

"Good, not a problem. Let's try another word." He looked at his machine again. "Submarine."

I smiled. "Sub."

He looked at me, waited, then said, "Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Can you say yes in mer?"

I did. He smiled and began giving me easier words to translate- talking words instead of thing words. We sat there saying words at each other until Captain Bridger stepped forward. "Lucas, why don't we take a break. I know you are loving to stay here all moon tide, gathering words. But I think we must give our guest a chance to rest."

"Of course, Captain. I can start organising the words I have so far. And I need to go see how Darwin is." He turned his ears to me and said, "Maybe later we are learning some put-words-together?" I smiled. The young pilot told me thank you and then started staring at his machine. I looked at Captain Bridger.

He said, "Matt, we.. really have no idea what sorts of needs merfolk have. So you are must telling us when you need something."

I smiled. "I am doing good, Captain Bridger. I am saying it if I need something."

"Good. I am thinking from the healer's expression.. and patience, that she is wanting to ask some questions of her own."

I looked over at her. My brow furled a little. "Why? I am not sick."

She smiled. "I am not just a healer, Matt. I am also a studier."

A scientist? Way cool! I grinned. "Really? What do you study?"

She looked almost shy, or embarrassed. "Marine life. I am completely fascinated by the different forms of life that are living in the ocean."

"And you are wanting to know how I can be a marine life? When I am supposed to be a greek myth?" I smiled.

"Most assuredly."

"I am not knowing if I can answer all your questions, but I am good to hear them."

"All right." She sat and thought for a moment. "I can't think of where to start. There are so many things.. how long have mers been in the ocean?"

"I am not completely sure. The stories are told from more than 1000 storyspans ago."

"What is a storyspan?"

"It is how long one mer lives."

"And how long is that?"

"It is hard to say so you will know it. Mers don't keep track of time like dolphins, or pilots do. We watch the moon tides, birthing years and story spans. I don't know exactly how long a story span is, but dolphins say they are 500 years long."

"Five hundred years?" She sounded, and looked, amased. "How old are you?"

I grinned. "Older than a born mer, and not dead yet. I am thinking I am halfway from my birthing years, my childhood, to being dead."

She started counting in her head. "And how long is childhood?"

"About one hundred years."

"So you're 300 years old."

I just shrugged. Then I thought of something. "I am coming on the ground one time before, to see pilots- they aren't pilots then, only walking apes. They say it is a certain year- 1769AD. It is just after my childhood then."

"So you're 350. My goodness. You don't look it."

I laughed. "My hair is turning white much later. I am looking it then."

"Is it because you are not keeping track of time that you are using the present word when you speak?"

"I am not sure I know what you are asking. I speak different words when I speak mer- and dolphin words are being spoken differently. Which are you meaning?"

"When you use a doing word, you say it as if you are doing it now. In the present."

"What else is there?"

"The not-now-before, and the not-now-later."

I grinned, she was trying so hard to explain things easily. "Oh! Those words. I know them, but there is not reason to say them - it is always now. I am usually thinking as if things are all now - but it is always obvious, to mers, when things are before or later, because we remember if it is happening another time."

"So you do understand before and later words."

"Yes.. although dolphin isn't having them very much. It is too hard to be saying dolphin not-now words. So I am saying now and when I am speaking pilot.. I am thinking it depends on how easy the words are."

"Hmm.. yes, and..is not the easiest words to learn."

I grinned, guessing she said the name of her words.

I looked over at the other pilots, listening. I was still holding Benjamin's hand, he wasn't going to get lost yet. I looked at Captain Bridger. "I am hungry."

He seemed startled. "What are you eating?"

"I am liking shrimp, or shellfish. I am eating oar weed if there is any."

He looked at the Healer. She bobbed her head and then said, "Yes, we have all of those things available. I am thinking you want them not-heated?"

"Not heated. The shrimp can be not alive, but not heated."

"All right. Benjamin, why don't you show our guest the eating area and we are bringing him something to eat." She started to stand up, then asked me, "How much are you eating?"

I shrugged. "Until I am not hungry. I am eating two hands of shrimp and some oar weed.. and any thing else that I am getting. Until I am not hungry."

"Well, then, we'll just provide you with some and you can eat until you are not hungry." I smiled at her- she sounded like she was teasing me. I stood up with Benjamin and he and Captain Bridger walked with me out of the room. When we got out to the pathway, I stopped and looked at Captain Bridger. Benjamin and he looked at me.

"Captain Bridger, is it good if I speak with Benajmin alone? I am needing to ask him some things and I am liking to not ask in front of other pilots."

"Of course," he bobbed his chin. "Perhaps you should take him to..instead of the eating area. That way pilots aren't staring, or interupting." Benjamin nodded. Then Captain Bridger said to me, ".. is ready to help you with anything you are needing." He gave Benjamin a look- a warning if ever I saw one. "Ask him if you need or want anything. And remember you are free to leave at any time- but I am liking to spend more time with you."

I smiled. "I am not in a hurry to be leaving. I am going nowhere.. for another hundred and fifty years, I think." I smiled and he smiled back. Then he went back into the room we had just left. I looked at Benjamin.

"Come on. We are going where we can talk and they are bringing your food to us."

"That sounds good. Food coming to me, instead of the other way around." He laughed. I smiled- this was very good.

We walked for a bit, then he asked, "What are you wanting to ask me?"

I tried to think of how- or whether, to say it. "Benjamin, can you show me how to say more things?"

He sounded surprised, but answered, "Of course. What things?"

"Everythings. So I can speak pilot and not dolphin all the time. Dolphin says things so differently than mer, I am not always sure I am saying things right, or well. I am not wanting to sound.. dumber than I naturally am." I watched the pathway as we walked, but had most ears on him.

"Matt.. you don't sound dumb. You sound.. like a not-pilot. We expect that. You're a mer."

"But are you teaching me to speak pilot?"

"Yes, I am teaching you. What are you wanting to start with?"

"I don't know.. I am quick learning. I am learning dolphin in little time."

"Well.. I guess the hardest part would be teaching you how to make the sounds. Like when I teach you to say my name."

"Benjamin." I said it, smiling. It was a good thing to be remembering.

He smiled. "Yeah.. I suppose we can start with names of things, until you learn to make all the sounds. Then you can worry about learning words."

"I'm not worried about learning words. I'm worried about not learning words." Benjamin laughed. This was *very* good. I smiled. I was glad to be holding his hand. It occured to me to wonder how he felt about it, but I wasn't going to ask- he might let go. We got to a little room full of all kinds of pilots things. Benjamin led me over to a bench and we sat down. I hadn't tried to let go and he hadn't tried to get away. Maybe he thought I needed to hold onto him, on this strange sub. Well, I did need to- because I didn't want to let go.

"Ok.. what should we start with?" Benjamin asked me but didn't wait for an answer. After he shook his head, he looked at me and smiled. Then he started to teach me to say something. After a few tries, I said- "seaQuest". He smiled and I decided it was a good start.

I stayed quiet while a couple pilots and the healer brought in some food. But they left Benjamin and I alone for me to eat. And Benjamin didn't tell them what we were doing. He watched me eat, not saying much as I peeled the shrimp and popped them in my mouth, four at a time. Hey, they weren't swimming away, so I could grab more of them. I wound the seaweed around one finger and ate it- and Benjamin laughed. I smiled at him, wondering why he thought it was funny but not complaining. I liked hearing him laugh. I liked making him pleased. I knew eventually I'd have to tell him why.. but I didn't worry about it.

After I finished eating what they had brought- still hungry but maybe that was all they had, I let Benjamin teach me how to say some more words. He explained who I saying, as he taught me how to say pilots' names, the name of the sub and the names of things around his room. That's where we were, he explained- in his room. I told myself it was too early to do anything about *that* no matter what had happened in the cave. I looked down, for any shrimp I might have missed the first time. Then I sighed to myself and figured I might as well ask.

"Benjamin.. I am being still hungry."

He smiled and walked over to the wall. I watched as he touched it and talked to it, telling it I was still hungry and would it bring me more food? This sub really had strange walls. When he came back over to sit beside me I asked him.

"How can your wall bring me food?"

"It is not the wall bringing food. The wall carries my voice to someone on another part of the sub. They will bring food."

"You weren't talking to the wall?"

"No, more like through the wall."

I thought about this. "Benjamin.. you have some strange walls." He laughed. Well. I was confused, but it was making him laugh again. I smiled. Confusion had never worked so well for me before. "How do I say, 'I am hungry'?" He spent a few minutes teaching me the words, until I could say them. The door opened and the Healer came in with more food. She started to hand me the bag, which I could smell held shrimp. I didn't take it, instead I smiled and said, in pilot, "I am hungry."

She grinned, surprised. "Well. Then its a good thing I brought you food, isn't it?" I took the bag and began digging out shrimps. "That is very impressive, Matt. You are speaking pilot very well."

"I am a quick learner." I smiled. Then I shut up, because eating shrimp is more important than talking, anytime. The Healer sat and talked with Benjamin while I ate: Benjamin told her he was teaching me names and other words. I didn't mind, I was learning fast enough soon I wouldn't be embarrassed that I didn't know it. The shrimp tasted good. I wondered that I might be eating all their shrimp, then decided the ocean was big enough for them to get more. And I enjoyed the novelty of being fed, instead of hunting down food. It was nice when the food didn't swim away.

"Are you/are not hungry when you are finished?" The Healer asked me.

"I am not knowing when I am not hungry. I am just not eating." I put another shrimp in my mouth. These pilots sure seemed to worry about the not-now a lot.

"Well, there is plenty of food available. Benjamin is knowing where it is and how to get it. You are welcome to eat as much, and as often as you are wanting."

I looked at her. Then I smiled. "Are you wanting to get me fat? Benjamin isn't looking at me if I am fat."

The Healer laughed and Benjamin did too although he was looking uncomfortable.. or embarrassed. He said something to the healer and she stood up and said she'd see me around. I nodded and she shut the door behind her, leaving me alone with Benjamin. He was looking at me, while I finished my last shrimp. Then I just stared back at him, waiting.

"What do you mean, I am not looking at you if you are fat?"

"If I am eating all I want, I am being fat and not appearing good anymore."

"What makes you think I am looking at you in the first place?" He smiled, he was teasing me.

"I am seeing you look at me. Especially when I am not wearing my covers, you are looking at me and smiling. I am remembering how difficult it wasn't in the cave, to get you to do more than look at me."

"Yeah, well, I am thinking you are pilot, in the cave."

"Maybe I am thinking you are a smart mer, in the cave." He laughed. I closed the bag, and left it sitting on the floor. I reached up and brushed Benjamin's face with my fingers, wondering if he would let me touch him. He just looked at me and I felt his pulse quicken. I leaned forward and kissed him, just on top of the lips. When I leaned back, he was still looking at me.. smiling. I leaned forward again and kissed him, this time I opened my mouth and found his tongue inbetween my teeth. I started to move forward, on top of him.

He put his hand on my chest and pushed me back. I tried not to show my hurt. He stood up and I felt my heart break.. he was leaving me? He stood at the door and then turned and came back. "I made the door not open. So no one will disturb us."

I smiled. I stood up and tried kissing him again and he kissed me back. I started to put my hands on him and discovered we had covers on. I stared at mine in dismay- I wasn't sure I could get it off. I tugged at it and Benjamin grinned. "Here, I am doing it." He pulled my covers off, then pulled his own off. Aha. Now I could take charge. I moved him around so his back was to the bench (it was soft, sorta like sand). He let me push him down onto it and I crawled after him, between his legs.

His smiled at me and I touched him. In many ways. Which was ok, because he touched me back and kept grinning and making noises. When he took my seed inside him I felt a burst of emotion in me and was so very glad I'd found him. I leaned onto him and we lay together. I decided I'd better ask if he knew what I wanted. What I needed.

"Benjamin."

"Yes, Matt?"

"I want to mate you."

He didn't say anything at first, then he smiled. "I think we just did."

I grinned. "I know.. but I am saying.. I want to mate you.. always." I watched the look on his face. Finally, he had the look I needed to see.

"I am not quite believing I am saying it.. but yes. I am mating you for always." He laughed. "You realise I am not living as long as you are."

I smiled fondly. "I know. But I am happy now." I felt the mate bond firmly wrapping itself around me and him. I didn't know if pilots could feel it, but I knew it was there. I couldn't ever leave him now, until he died. He kissed me and hugged me, and I thought maybe he did feel it.

I asked him.

"You know, I thought.. I mean, it is so weird that I am saying yes to you, you are mer, and I am not.. but I am realising that I can't say no. I am in love, I think. I feel it right in here,"

he touched his chest. "I think I would be very miserable if you swim away and never are coming back."

I kissed his chest, where his love was. "Then it is very good I cannot leave. I am miserable without you, too."

He smiled. "But I hardly know you."

I looked at him. "Yes, you know me. I am your mate." He looked at me with a strange expression.. and then smiled.

"You're right." And he kissed me. We made love again and this time I tasted his seed. Among my people that is something only mates ever do. It made me feel warm and tingling all over, that he had let me. When we were through we wrapped ourselves around each other and fell asleep.

I woke up and watched him for an hour, before he opened his eyes and smiled at me. "You are always not asleep when I wake up."

"Pilots sleep more than mers. You are like sleepfish."

He grinned. "Maybe you just don't sleep enough." He was teasing me. I felt a warm thrill down to my toes. I was so happy he'd said yes.

"Maybe I am liking staying awake and watching you sleep."

He groaned, and rolled his eyes. "That is all I am needing. To be stared at while I am sleeping."

I leaned forward and kissed him. "I am needing to be staring at you often."

He returned my kiss and kissed me back, longer and hungrily. I let him, then leaned away from him and said, "You are insatiatable, are you knowing it?"

He grabbed me. "I am inspired."

I laughed. With words like these I was going to be flattered into enjoying him a lot. I wriggled on top of him. "What is it you are inspired to?"

He moaned. "Ohh..inspired for that again."

"That?" I wriggled again. He wriggled back, but it felt like he couldn't have not wriggled. I smiled and decided I'd better start teasing him in earnest. Even if he yelled.

Especially if he yelled..

# FRIENDS

## By Clifton Evans

The sun was nearing the horizon. On the fifth floor of a Paris hotel, Joseph Dawson sat on a balcony overlooking the street, watching the cars moved haphazardly through the square. Traffic controls ran differently in France and the American took a few minutes to watch the chaotic movements of both cars and people.

*It's good to just relax*, Dawson thought as he sipped his coffee. *I can't remember the last time I just took off. Took a vacation in every sense of the word.*

Joe Dawson sat quietly for several minutes, watching and thinking until, finally, he drained his cup. Then, with casual effort borne of long years of practice, he pushed, then pulled himself to his feet, felt his prosthetic legs lock and moved his body with a well trained rhythm and balance. Once in awhile, he would remember when his legs were whole, when these movements took no thought at all. He would remember the fall, the brief pain, the darkness...the loss.

Joe shivered, then shrugged. When it happened, there was sympathy, understanding, even help for the physical loss. But there was no one who wanted to hear of that other trauma, the lose of his soul. Left alone to deal with his own personal tragedy, Dawson eventually chose to bury the past, to ignore it and move on. But sometimes, when life stood still, when his thoughts drew inward, then the shadows would come to haunt him, reminding him of his loneliness.

The American entered his bedroom from the balcony, quiet in this thoughts again. His hotel room was a small suite containing a bedroom, living area, kitchenette and full bath. Nice, cozy and quaint. Dawson had special arrangements for this room year-round.

*It's part of my job, to come to Paris at a moment's notice. Might as well make it comfortable.*

The phone rang. Joe jerked around, taken off guard. *Who?*

No one, not even other Watchers, knew he was in Paris. He'd taken his leave for private business, which was allowed on occasion. And his ranking was high enough to keep him safe from the scrutiny of his associates. Cautiously, Joe reached for the phone. "Yes."

"Hell of a phone manner, Dawson."

The smooth, lightly accented voice rolled through Dawson's nerves, lifted his spirits. Duncan MacLeod.

*He's the only one who knows I'm here, but I never gave him my number. Never told him where I was staying. But I guess when you're 400 years old, information is easy to get.*

"I only speak this way to my friends," he countered with a smile in his voice, sharing a private joke they'd exchanged almost two hours ago. He'd asked MacLeod out for a drink. It was

his intention to strengthen the rapport growing between them, to declare the friendship he knew existed.

His heart began to sink.

*Maybe Duncan's not ready to trust me. I wouldn't blame him, after all that's happened.*

Still he kept hope in his voice as he said, "I hope we're still good to meet for that drink."

"Oh, yeah," MacLeod replied quickly. "In fact, I wondered if you wanted to change our plans. My neighbor fancies himself a chef of the highest order and his cooking is good. He's brought me dinner tonight, enough for two or three people. And I didn't want it to go to waste. Interested in coming to the barge?"

The Watcher's heart leapt in response to the unexpected invitation. His grip on the phone receiver firmed. "Sure," he replied, forcing his voice to project a calm, business-like manner. "Sounds good, MacLeod. I'll be right over."

"I'll pick you up," Duncan said in a tone that brooked no argument. "Be ready in twenty minutes. See you then."

The phone conversation ended with a gentle click. Joe stood still for several seconds, bringing his heart rate down to normal.

*He's asked me to dinner? Why? Christ, why are you questioning it? Haven't you been working towards this?*

Dawson cradled the phone, petted his beard into place, wondering if he were dreaming or if the casual good cheer he heard in the immortal's voice was something else.

*Cut it out, Joseph! You wanted to be friends and so MacLeod is going to be a friend. You're lucky you've managed this much in the last six months without anyone noticing.*

Taking a deep breath, then another, Dawson let the whole matter alone. Walking into the living room, he paused by a mirror for one last look. He wondered if he should comb out his beard and put on deodorant, then laughed at his own fantastic thoughts.

*Duncan's bisexual. I know that from his history. But imagine someone like MacLeod giving me a second glance. What am I thinking? Stop acting like a teenager, Joseph Dawson. You're not going on a date, for God's sake! You're going to have dinner with a friend.*

**********

Twenty minutes later, Dawson was still reflecting upon his decision to go to Duncan's barge. The prime rule all Watchers are taught when they first begin training was never to make contact with any immortals. Immortals were alien. Their activities needed to be observed, catalogued and analyzed. It was a contest, a game. The prize, so far as any Watcher was able to gather, was the salvation of Mankind...or their destruction. No immortal was suppose to know about Watchers. Yet Darius knew...and now MacLeod.

Joe looked up as a squeal caught his attention. A mother and her two children had stopped in front of the glass doors leading outside. The woman was doing her best to wipe the remains of a chocolate bar from the smaller child's face as the little boy protested the action. Dawson smiled,

briefly wondering why he never got married as many encouraged him to do and have a family of his own.

*Because it's not in my nature. I'd do a woman wrong...and live a lie.*

The woman gently tweaked the boy's nose, then straightened to move on, both children in tow. Joe smiled briefly, but his thoughts quickly returned to his relationship with the immortal, Duncan MacLeod.

Joe had studied the Highlander's life for thirteen years when he was assigned to him after the last Watcher died of a heart attack. His actual meeting with Duncan was prompted by the death of one of the greatest immortals who ever lived, a warrior-priest named Darius. That meeting had been powerful. Dawson had long admired the strong human qualities, the kindness and generosity MacLeod gave freely to those in need. Joe always felt an overwhelming need to protect this man.

*You cannot protect an immortal, you must not. They must be allowed to fight among themselves, to win or lose. And we must watch... and be prepared.*

Words of his teacher, his mentor in the field, filtered through Dawson's mind. For a moment, he remembered standing by the old man's side, witnessing his first fight. A man and a woman met one another in a lumber yard in the middle of the night. The swords clashed and sparked. Joe's instinct was to run to the woman's aid, but his teacher held him back. Then, to his surprise, the woman pushed the man, forcing him down. A second later, the sword whispered, slicing through the man's neck like melted butter. There was a great wind, lightening and wood in the yard burst into flames, exploding as wisps of energy curled around them before passing through the woman. For several seconds the rhythm built and Joe became afraid. So much power. It was as if the whole world were going to explode. Then the energy faded into nothing. The woman fell to her knees, drained but alive and his teacher then prodded Joe, telling him it was time to go...

"Dawson? Ready to go?"

The light Scottish burr startled the Watcher from his reverie. Duncan MacLeod stood in front of him, the immortal's face showing a mixture of welcome and some amusement. Joe smiled as his body began the effort of standing. But as he rose up, a strong supportive hand gripped his arm, easing the stress to his hips and back. Usually, he avoided the unspoken aid of others. It made him feel uncomfortably dependent, if only for the moment. But MacLeod's assistance was a balm, and he took advantage of it, leaning against the taller man before gaining his balance.

"Thanks, MacLeod."

"MacLeod?" The Highlander ushered Dawson from the hotel to his convertible parked outside. "Can't we at least try for first names? For dinner?" His teeth gleamed as he grinned. "I prefer Mac."

Dawson carefully lowered himself into the passenger seat. "Sure... Mac."

**********

True to his word, Duncan's friend's cooking was excellent, even if the cook himself reminded him of a nosy aunt. The shrimp, mixed in vegetables and spices, was as fresh as Dawson had ever tasted in the States. His conversation with Duncan was comfortably neutral. And when they were finished, Joe started to get up, determined to help clean. But Duncan ordered him to stay

put, then took the empty plates away. Dawson eased himself back into the old, but well cushioned couch.

The barge Duncan lived in was nicely renovated. The interior of the barge was a huge rectangular living area, sectioned off for different needs. As a whole, it was sparsely furnished with antique chests and cabinets and in front of him, off to the side, was a small cast-iron fireplace which nearly divided the whole area in half. Along the sides, there were small shelves filled with books, the walls held paintings and other artwork, though he noted that none of them seem to bear the style of Tessa Noel.

*It's too soon, too painful for him to display her life for everyone else to see. It took me years to look back on the things I'd lost.*

Beside him, centered between two port holes, was a wide platform bed. Dawson contemplated it a moment, his imagination running wild. He wondered, if he were whole, if Duncan and he would--

"Careful, you'll spill the wine."

MacLeod's voice was right behind him. Joe turned his head, his hand losing its grip on the wine glass he was holding and spilling its contents. Fortunately, the glass was nearly empty, but several drops bled a red line down Joe's white shirt. "Damn!"

"Here." Duncan came around the couch, his expression purposeful, his eyes bright. He took the glass, then picked up a linen napkin from the coffee table behind him.

"Sorry, Mc-- Mac," Joe straightened himself and looked to see how he could help.

Duncan did not acknowledge the apology. Instead, he lean forward and began rubbing at the red stain on Dawson's shirt. "That wine is richer than most. This probably won't come out."

Joe found the immortal's sudden invasion into his personal space both disturbing and exciting. Normally, Duncan's long hair was held back in a respectable pony-tail. But since they'd arrived at the barge, MacLeod had untied it. The soft, dark hair cascaded around the Highlander's shoulders like a royal mane. For an instant, Dawson had an urge to touch it, but better reason and decorum held him back. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I'll see what I can do, but it wasn't expensive."

"All right," MacLeod's eyes raked over him as if sensing something more, then smiled and withdrew. When he returned, he sat down and held out another wine glass to him. "Want some more?"

Dawson nodded. "It's good stuff." He looked pointedly at the bottle that had no label. "What is it?"

"Something Darius made at the end of the Second World War." Duncan picked the bottle up, studying it a moment before pouring a little into the glass. "He was really talented with the spirits."

"Yes," Joe responded quietly, for a moment remembering the gentle priest and mourning his loss.

The Highlander nodded his agreement as he leaned back, his body a little closer to Dawson's. "So, Joe," he began lightly. "Now that we've shared a drink, think we can be friends?"

The question caught Joe off-guard. He stared at Duncan, taking in the subtle change of tone in the light Scottish accent. "Sure....I hope so." The Watcher smiled cautiously. "Are we?"

Duncan laughed. Dawson returned the laughter cautiously, then sipped at his drink. The room was getting warmer. His heart was pounding against his chest.

*No. I'm not ready for this. And MacLeod...what's he up to? Or am I just imagining this?* Joe tensed, suddenly feeling awkward.

Duncan patted the American's arm. "Relax, Joe. I'm teasing you." He got up. "I want to give you something."

Dawson watched the Highlander, his body reacting to the immortal in ways it hadn't to any man in many years.

*God, he's beautiful!*

MacLeod moved with the grace of a great cat, walking to a locked cabinet near the bed. With a key from his pocket, Duncan opened a small door on the side. "I wanted to give this back to you. I trust you'll know what to do with it, how to keep it safe." He returned and held out a book.

Dawson stared at the object, his collector's mind instantly recognizing the great age of the book.

*Pre-printing press....Hand written. Latin...No.* Joe reached out to take the book from Duncan's hands as he understood. *German...Old German.* He lifted the cover and gasped in surprise. The ink was faded, but the picture was clear. The symbol of a circle enclosing a dove. "Oh..." The Watcher unconsciously turned his right arm up, studying an exact copy of the symbol tattooed on his arm. "It's the Fifth Chronicle!"

MacLeod's expression was strained. "Darius had it for nearly eight hundred years."

Dawson nodded. "We always suspected. It was written by the father, then passed to his son, after he'd taken his oath as a Watcher. Then..." He smiled. "Then, while the son - Gustav was his name - was observing Darius, he disappeared. So did the Chronicle." Joe closed the book, his fingers rubbing over the ancient cover. "From what I understand, there was a lot of speculation. No one thought Gustav had died, but perhaps had joined the monastery with some influence by Father Darius, who some felt was not quite as celibate as his peers."

"No," Duncan said enigmatically, then relaxed and finished his glass of wine. "Though he kept his vow as far as women were concerned."

Joe jerked his head up as he understood MacLeod's implications.

*Darius loved men.* He studied Duncan's expression, the openness. *Oh God...* "You and he were lovers?"

The immortal shrugged, then looked away. "I was his lover. He was my friend."

*What's the difference?* Joe focused his attention on MacLeod. The immortal sighed as if he'd heard the unspoken thought.

"Darius wanted commitment from me. He wanted me to stay with him." Duncan rubbed his face, then leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "But I couldn't...I loved him, but I had too much to do. I couldn't stay cloistered."

*And he blames himself for Darius' death.* Dawson put the ancient book down on the table in front of him, then reached out to rub Duncan's back in a comforting gesture. "It wasn't your fault."

"He was sensitive, more sensitive than most other immortals ever get." Pain etched itself into the Highlander's voice. "He told me he'd dreamed of his death...and I didn't believe him."

Dawson continued stroking him, his own emotions churning. He remembered his brother-in-law's betrayal. James Horton had murdered a holy man on sacred ground.

"How could you? Darius was safe on holy ground and you didn't know about us."

MacLeod shrugged. Darkness receded from his face. "I know, Joe. But sometimes the waste of it strikes me. Sometimes I wish that I had gotten there sooner, or had stayed with him when he asked me to." he signed. "But it doesn't do any good to live in 'what if'."

The Watcher nodded in understanding. The wine was doing its job. Joe felt relaxed and comfortable. "You are among our best hope, Mac. And you've become one of my best friends."

"Even if I am an immortal?" Duncan ventured, his dark eyes glittering.

Dawson cocked his head. "Sometimes I forget about that." Joe withdrew his hand from Duncan's back. "Sometimes," he continued, his mind wandering as he took another sip of the wine. "I find it...exciting."

"Really?" MacLeod's tone changed. Joe swallowed hard as realized what he'd said.

*Damn!*

The immortal smiled softly, his dark eyes watching Dawson carefully. Then, as if sensing the growing tension, he drew back, giving Joe more space. "May I ask you a personal question?" he asked quietly.

Dawson stared at MacLeod, tensing even more. *Please don't force this!* one part of his mind pleaded. *Ask me so we can end this.* his alter ego countered. Joe picked up his wine glass and sat back, forcing himself to relax. *Here it comes. Ready, Joseph?*

"Sure."

MacLeod glanced down at the Watcher's legs. "How did this happen?"

The question was so distant from the one Joe was prepared for, he jerked his head around, glaring at the immortal. "What?"

Duncan held up a hand, his expression immediately repentant. "Joe, I'm sorry. I was curious. If you don't want to tell me..."

"No." Dawson drained the remainder of the wine from his glass. "I--" *Don't say it, you jerk!* "Duncan...Mac, I'm not offended." He gripped MacLeod's shoulder in reassurance. The

muscle beneath the cotton shirt the Highlander wore was as hard as steel. *Beautiful man*, his inner self admired. "It's okay. I just wasn't expecting it."

"You don't have to tell me," Duncan emphasized.

"I don't mind," Joseph reassured once more. He toyed with the empty glass he held, noting the quality of the crystal and the way it picked up the light within the barge.

"There was an accident," Dawson began, then stalled. Duncan merely looked at him expectantly. For a moment, Joe fought with his instincts. He could tell the immortal the story he told most others. An accident. A drunk driver. The illusion of an imagined wife taken from him forever. Or he could tell the truth. And, for some reason, he felt it important to tell the truth to this man.

He put his glass down, then folded his hands on his lap. "I want to tell you a story, Duncan. I don't know why. It's one few people, even other Watchers know. Officially, I was in a car accident."

The immortal's eyebrow rose. "Officially?"

Dawson nodded. *Truth, Joseph*, his inner voice chanted. *Truth...*

"About fifteen years ago, I was assigned to a Nathan Martin. He was an immortal of some two hundred years. He originally came from the wilderness in the western United States, his history full of violence and reckless living. I watched him for almost five years, keeping tabs on his movements, trying to warn some who stood in his way -- though I knew it was wrong." He did not look up, but sensed Duncan's growing interest.

"In 1979, he was on Long Island, near Hampton Beach. He was challenged by another equally nasty immortal, Lester Parker. The Watcher assigned to him was my friend, Anthony. Tony was at least ten years younger than me, but seemed to know more about immortals than I felt I could learn in a lifetime. We kept vigil together on a lookout point above the beach of the Sound while the two men fought." Dawson shivered, his memory of the incident coming back to him in vivid detail for the first time in many years. In his mind, he could again hear the clashing swords, feel the building energy these battles always produced. "We thought we were safe."

"What happened?" MacLeod prompted. His hand rested on Dawson's arm, supporting him, urging him to continue.

Comforted, Dawson drew in a deep breath then continued. "Parker won the fight. But Martin's quickening was more than we expected. The energy enveloped the entire beach. The water itself seem to explode. Anthony thought we should run, but I thought we were still safe. Then the dirt and rock fell from under us. We fell fifty feet to the beach." He remembered the fall, the brief pain. Dawson felt the Highlander's supportive arm come around his shoulders. "I wasn't hurt too badly. My legs were broken. Parker was standing over Anthony." Dawson shook his head, watching the scene as if it were a movie. "He was trying to get up. He looked more stunned than hurt. Parker was smiling. It almost looked like he was going to help. Then he swung his sword..."

*....and my Anthony was no more.*

"Parker knew, Duncan," Dawson continued after swallowing several times. The memory was fresh again, as if it had happened just moments ago. "He knew Anthony had been following him. He came to me and I knew I was dead. But instead he just cut through my legs." Dawson frowned as his phantom legs twitched, remembering the trauma. "He asked me if I was hurt. I--"

Joe closed his eyes. "I said thought my legs were broken. He smiled, then sliced through my legs, just like that." The Watcher shuttered. "I guess he wanted to leave me for dead. But the police came. The few people who lived in the area must have seen the light show."

"I'm sorry, Joe," Duncan said softly, sincerely.

Joe closed his eyes, then shrugged. "It was a long time ago. Sometimes I almost forget."

"About Anthony?"

Duncan's quiet question caught Dawson off-guard. The immortal's dark eyes were even softer than they had been, almost glowing with emotion. Joe met the gaze, his own eyes burned with unshed tears.

*He knows.* Joe realized in an instant. *He understands.* "I could never forget him." Dawson's voice trembled. "He and I were...together a long time."

As he ended his revelation, Joe was drawn into a bear hug, Duncan's strength surrounding him like a cocoon. For the first few seconds, Joe accepted the gesture stiffly, then returned the hug, giving into his greatest need; someone to share the tragic moment. It was a kind of comfort that tore at the well-constructed barriers Dawson had erected over the years. The frustration and pain of the tragedy erupted from his soul exploding like a bomb in his being. Joe's vision blurred and his body trembled as he began to cry.

"Ah, Joe," The Highlander's body began a soothing motion, rocking the Watcher gently. Dawson remembered the first time he met Anthony, a babe in the vast woods of Watchers and immortals. There was awkward curiosity followed by moments of sheer intimacy. Then it was gone, fading as his memories faded. Quietly, Dawson simply let himself be, taking in the feeling of Duncan's warmth, the brush of the immortal's long hair against his face.

After Anthony's death, Joe had not sought out other lovers, the fear and pain were too great. And his body was no longer as it had been. He himself was fiercely independent. But on occasion, others would look...or stare. *Pity.* He'd shut himself away from it, ignored it as one ignored a fly that constantly flew in one's face.

For thirteen years, Duncan MacLeod had been his assignment. To be watched as all other immortal were watched. From a distance. In secret. But when Darius was killed. Not only was Duncan on the warpath, stumbling on to knowledge no immortal should have, but he carried a lost secret, the Fifth Chronicle. This forced Joe to do what no Watcher was permitted to do, even under torture. He revealed himself to the Highlander.

Something happened at that meeting. A bond formed between them, then a friendship of sorts. Dawson cared about Duncan's well-being, began to interfere where he could. One day, in a quiet moment, he understood his real feeling, his love for Duncan MacLeod. But he also knew nothing would ever come of it. Duncan had Tessa, a beautifully talented woman who seemed a perfect companion. Still, as the months passed, he would dream. He would be whole again, Duncan's body would be naked and they would be making passionate love together. But the dreams would always end in feelings of guilt, even after Tessa death. His desire for the immortal was wrong. It violated his vows. For that reason, Dawson remained silent, distancing himself when feelings came too close to the surface.

*Like now, Joseph. Watch yourself, Watcher.*

Dawson pulled back, shielding the movement by reaching for the handkerchief in his pocket. "I'm sorry," he said awkwardly, wiping his face.

"Don't do that, Joe." Duncan's hands suddenly gripped Dawson's face. "Look at me."

Joe Dawson swallowed hard as he obeyed.

*This has gone too far.*

He met the Highlander's dark gaze, feeling like a moth captured in a candle's light. Duncan's presence grew stronger, drawing him, compelling him. Joe weakly resisted the force for the space of two heartbeats. His eyes moved to Duncan's lips, mere inches from his own. He wondered what would happen if he kissed...

Duncan's lips captured his, inviting response. Joe grunted in surprise, then groaned as old feelings emerged from his past, running through his body to awaken forgotten pleasures. MacLeod's hands moved over Dawson's shirt, working at the buttons. The action triggered every alarm bell in Joe's head.

*He's seducing me, and I'm letting him! He's seducing me...* Dawson froze in Duncan's embrace.

"Joe?" Duncan drew back, his fingers tracing a faint caress down the side of Dawson's face. "Do you want me to stop?" MacLeod asked, already drawing away.

"No!" Joe's mouth spoke more quickly than his reason. His nerve endings surged with a sexual energy he'd never know before, even with Anthony. His mind screamed with a mixture of terror and excitement. Dawson's fingers softly explored Duncan's face, brushing stray hairs out of the immortal's eyes. "MacLeod, I'm not sure this is a good idea. This could be dangerous, especially for you." The Watcher smiled sadly. "Anyway...I'm too old for this."

MacLeod laughed a little, a low musical sound that filled the air. Dawson's breath caught as the immortal's hand slid between his thighs.

"I'm four hundred years old, Joseph," Duncan admonished. Knowing fingers pressed at the erection growing under the cotton fabric of Dawson's pants. Joe groaned, unable to control his reaction to Duncan's foreplay. "Do you still think you're too old?" the Highlander challenged, his tone light with friendly amusement. "Or are you afraid of other Watchers?"

The heat between their bodies was growing stronger. Inhaling, Dawson took in the scent of the Highlander's body, an enticing aroma. Joe inhaled again, enjoying the sensation that filled him.

"I've just about violated every rule in the book," he admitted slowly, answering MacLeod's serious question. "Every rule I've taken an oath to uphold. But..."

"But?" Duncan prompted gently.

Joe licked his lips, felt his cheeks flush.

"I love you, MacLeod. Not like Anthony," Dawson amended quickly. "But then you're not like Anthony. But I think it's the differences I've fallen in love with most, Highlander." He took a deep breath as the immortal caressed his face, then cupped his cheek in an affectionate gesture. "Duncan, this has happened to other Watchers. Some relationships went undiscovered for most of the mortal's life. Some haven't. And when they haven't...Watchers take care of their own."

Duncan who nodded solemnly. "They would kill you." MacLeod leaned forward, lightly kissing the Watcher. "I told you it can end now," he offered once again.

"No." Joe squirmed, his body responding to Duncan's caresses like a thirsty man to a glass of water. "I told you, I love you. If it means my death," he shrugged, his decisions made. "Then it means my death. But I don't want to end this."

Duncan smiled again, his eyes regained their glow of passion. But still, he hesitated as if sensing Dawson's doubts. "We'll protect each other, Joe. Do you trust me?"

"Always," Joe whispered.

*But...*

"What is it?" MacLeod asked patiently, his hands petted Dawson's beard. "What?"

"Why?" Dawson hesitated. "Why me?"

Duncan straightened, his left hand reached lower, sliding down the American's thigh to where the physical leg ended and the prosthesis began. "Because of this?" Joe nodded, and the immortal laughed good-naturedly.

Joe hesitated. "I'm not a beautiful blond," he ventured.

MacLeod sighed impatiently. "You're a beautiful man, Dawson. And I want to make love to you, not a blond."

Duncan's lips trailed across his cheek, stopping just under his ear. Joe gripped MacLeod's hair, as the Highlander's teeth gently sank into the soft skin there, stimulating every nerve in his body. "Mac..."

"Shhhh..." Duncan's warm breath blew into his ear. Joe hissed, his hands playing over the immortals hair, caressing the back of MacLeod's neck. The Highlander laughed, then unbuttoned Dawson's shirt, his fingers combed through the graying chest hairs they encountered. Joe flung his head back, grunting in pleasure.

"You're look beautiful, Joseph," Duncan whispered, his finger tips trailing down the Watcher's chest, fingernails lightly scraping the skin. "You feel beautiful."

Joe shivered. "For a cripple, you mean," he quipped, not know what possessed him to say the words.

Perhaps it was his own need to express the dark fears raging in his soul. The universe came to a halt. MacLeod's hands froze. Dawson picked his head up to see the damage he'd done. The Highlander's expression was intense. Dawson swallowed, wondering if he'd ruined the moment.

"Mac?"

Without warning, Duncan pulled Dawson to his feet, nearly taking him off balance. "Duncan," Joe protested. But the immortal did not acknowledge him. Instead, the American found himself propelled forward by supportive hands which guided him to the platform bed.

"Sit down, Joe," MacLeod commanded firmly, though his voice deep with emotion. Joe nervously obeyed, noting the soft mattress beneath him, taking the opportunity to meet the immortal's eyes. They were nearly black, full of an agelessness he'd rarely seen in anyone except Darius.

"Mac, I'm sor---"

"Don't apologize, Joe," Duncan said quietly, his hands returned to Dawson's shirt, pulling the garment off the Watcher's shoulders, his hands grazing over the bare skin they encountered. "Just let me love you."

Dawson closed his eyes, his emotions clashing, making him tremble with desire and fear. "I don't know if I'll be able to... " Joe's cheeks burned, his hands closed into fists. "It's been too long." He laughed, "I've been celibate for more than fifteen years."

"Relax, Joseph." Duncan pulled Dawson's shirt off and away. "It'll be all right. I promise."

Joe tried, taking a deep breath, then another. MacLeod's lips teased his jawline under his beard, then grazed over his collar bone. Waves of desire filled Dawson as those lips, then a knowing tongue licked one nipple, then the other. Joe felt his backbone turn to jelly and he lay back on the bed, assured when the Highlander stretched out beside him. The immortal's hands worked at Dawson's belt, then at his fly, pulling down the zipper, gaining access to a more intimate part of Joseph Dawson

*Oh God...* Joe felt his cock grow larger, felt it stir from the boxer shorts he wore.

"So beautiful," Duncan whispered, kissing Dawson's stomach as his hand reached into Joe's briefs.

"Ohhhh." Dawson's hips moved up to meet the touch, Duncan's touch. His cock was nearing its limit. Joe's breathing came in short bursts as he neared climax. *Christ, just like a teenager.* Joe licked his lips, his hands gripped MacLeod's hand to stop him. *Too soon, Mac.*

"Mac!"

"Shhhh." Dawson felt fingers move to the base of his organ, felt them press firmly with an even pressure. Almost immediately, Joe sighed as impending explosion subsided. Then Duncan's hands were pulling at the waistband of Dawson's pants and underpants.

"Let me do this, Joe." Duncan pulled at the American's clothes. "Lift your hips a little."

Excitement threatened to overwhelm Dawson again. But somehow, he managed to comply, using his upper body strength to pull up. Immediately, his pants were gone, drawn down, then off. He was nearly naked, except...

"Tell me if I'm hurting you," Duncan said. Sensitive fingers feel along Joe's leg, where the prosthesis began. Then, for the first time since beginning his life as a double amputee, he heard and felt the velcro strips and fastenings of his false legs being released by someone other than himself. Once and awhile, when he'd walked too long, the sudden freedom caused his stumps to throb. But now they simply sighed in relief, his legs released from the heated interior of plastic and rubber over cotton sleeves. "Better?"

Joe studied the man who now stood at the side of the bed, felt the Highlander's hands caressing his thighs, inviting response. Duncan returned his gaze, his smile a beacon which beckoned Dawson.

*He's so handsome. So powerful. What am I doing?*

MacLeod drew back slightly, his hands reaching for his own clothing. "Watch me, Joseph," he commanded seductively as he began unbuttoning his shirt. "I'm no different than you are."

The Highlander's shirt was opened, then stripped away, revealing a broad, tight, muscular chest. Then his pants were opened and removed, revealing all of the immortal to Dawson.

*Holy Mother of* -- Dawson found himself staring at the erection between Duncan's legs. It was not as big as he'd imagined (or could imagine on any man), but it was full, stiff and needy.

*For me?*

"Finished looking?" Duncan's tone was amused and husky. Joe smiled.

"I don't think we've even started," the Watcher replied, suddenly feeling passion wash through him. "Have we?"

"Not by far," came Duncan's response in a thick Scottish burr. The immortal prodded Dawson further onto the wide bed, climbing in as Joe pulled himself to one side.

Their kissing resumed as if it hadn't been interrupted. The passionate heat of Duncan's body covered Dawson, causing the Watcher to gasp as their cocks brushed each other.

*I can't believe this is happening. I'm dreaming...*

MacLeod's weight suddenly lifted from Dawson. But before the American could wonder, he felt what he'd never thought to feel again. For the past fifteen years, he'd been celibate, bringing himself off with empty orgasms when needed. Now, he saw Duncan's head between his thighs, felt pure electricity as the Highlander's tongue lightly teased over the head of his straining erection.

"No... God."

The immortal's mouth closed on Joe's cock, taking it as eagerly as a long awaited meal. Dawson cried out as his body registered the long forgotten sensation of another's lips and tongue on his organ. He groaned and gasped as the rhythm was quickly set. Duncan seem to know what he wanted, seem to know where to lick, where to suck, where to gently bite to make Joe scream.

Then, he felt another sensation. An energy seem to build, reminding him of the many fights he'd witnessed during his career. He felt it from Duncan's hands, from the immortal's mouth, from the air that filled the spaces between them.

It was like static electricity, only stronger, more demanding. He imagined he could see streaks of lightning fill the room, thought he could hear something crash to the floor. Dawson felt this phantom energy invade his nervous system, centering on his cock, on the man making love to him. It was something he wanted to continue forever, but his body demanded release. Without thinking, Dawson grasped Duncan's head, digging his hands into the silken hair, forcing his cock into the warm haven. MacLeod never paused, never faltered.

There was an explosion, bright lights; though Dawson couldn't tell if it was real or imagined. Spasms of pain and pleasure shot into Joe's soul, then expanded into the universe. His body twisted, then collapsed.

"Joe?"

Dawson drew in a deep breath, then let it out.

"Joe, are you all right?"

Duncan's voice was deep, full of passion. Joe blinked. MacLeod's face was above his, glistening with sweat. "I think I've died." Dawson reached up, touching MacLeod's hair, caressing the immortal's face. "But I guess I made it to heaven."

Duncan laughed, then dipped his head, kissing Joe, letting the American tasted himself in MacLeod's mouth. Amazement filled Dawson as his body began to stir once more.

"Mac, I love you," he whispered.

"Joseph," Duncan replied, his voice hoarse. "Joseph, I want to--" The Highlander hesitated, his dark eyes met Dawson's. Joe felt the immortal's hands between his legs, reaching past his cock to the crack between his ---

*He wants to fuck me!* The thought was more calm than Dawson's reaction to it. He looked MacLeod in the eye, seeing the passion.

*When an immortal takes a head, like Duncan did yesterday, their energy and passions are multiplied for several days. They seem to have an overwhelming need for sexual release, however they can find it.* Joe sighed, relaxing completely. *He could have found anyone in this city. Any man or woman would have gone to any lengths to satisfy his needs. But he wants me.*

"Joseph, you can say 'no'," Duncan told him, his fingers continuing to entice, but his expression told Dawson that he could refuse without consequences. "I'll tell you that I've thought of this for months, you and I," MacLeod whispered. "But we can do something el--"

"No." Joseph pulled himself up on his elbows. His eyes wandered over MacLeod's body, taking in every contour, every muscles. Finally his gaze settled on the immortal's cock, taking in its fullness, its need.

*Been awhile, Joseph. Gonna hurt like hell. Think he'll be gentle? Can you trust him?*

Dawson smiled, his fingers touching the organ, producing a hiss from Duncan. "I want to feel you inside me, Mac," he said, meaning it. "Whatever you want."

The Highlander's face transformed. His smile brightened Dawson's universe. "Whatever you want, Joe," he countered. "I'll make this good for you," he promised.

Duncan withdrew slightly, reaching back. Dawson heard a drawer open, then close. Joe's heart pounded with anticipation as he saw the tube of lubricant.

*Duncan's an active man. Of course he'd have something like that handy.*

Duncan kissed him, sucking the air from Dawson. His hands moved over the Watcher's body, stimulating passion and need.

"Turn on your side for me, Joe," the immortal commanded, his hands already encouraging movement. Dawson easy complied, knowing the position Duncan wanted. He turned until one thigh overlapped the other, giving access to what MacLeod wanted.

Almost immediately, he felt warm digits slide between the cheeks of his ass. The immortal's preparations were careful. The lubricant was spread across his opening, one finger moving into the wanted hole.

Dawson grunted; partially in pleasure, partially in discomfort. The Highlander was slow and gentle, pushing into Joe in an easy rhythm.

The Watcher relaxed his body completely, allowing the invasion of one, then three digits. MacLeod's body was stretched out behind him, raining nips and kisses over Dawson's back.

Joe could feel the immortal's cock against his ass, warm and stiff. Duncan's fingers were moving easily within Dawson, pushing deeper, seeking--

"Oh yes!" It was an explosion. Joe's universe erupted into light as his prostate was found and touched. "Mac!"

"Feel good, Joseph?" Duncan teased, his voice strained with control.

"Yes," Dawson groaned, trying to push back, finding his lack of lower legs a disadvantage in his efforts. "Push harder!" he demanded.

"I'll do better than that," MacLeod told him. Dawson moaned as Duncan's fingers withdrew, then hissed as they were replaced by the stiff rod of the immortal's cock. "Ready for me, Joe?"

"Yes." Dawson's entire body felt as if it were created for this moment, for this consumption. His cock, so thoroughly milked only minutes ago, was fully aroused. "Yes," he repeated.

Then he felt the first sensation of Duncan's cock moving inside him, pushing past well lubricated rings of muscles until he could feel MacLeod's hips against his ass. It was painful at first, then merely uncomfortable. Then, as the Highlander found that special spot within Joe, it was more pleasurable than he could remember.

Dawson could feel the energies rising between them again.

Duncan moved in his own rhythm, moaning with each thrust. Joe felt helpless, pinned by the immortal's body, held prisoner by the bond that held them together. The Highlander's hand closed around the Watcher's cock, massaging the organ in time to the motion of his hips.

"Ride with me, Joseph," MacLeod whispered into Dawson's ear as his thrusts grew more demanding. "Come with me," he demanded in a thick, Scottish burr.

Joe found he had little choice. He cried out his pleasure, feeling as if lightening were flashing through their bodies.

*I had heard of this*, a logical part of his mind managed to comment. *The quickening sometimes can be shared. Is this what I'm feeling? Oh God....*

The energy around him became a storm. Dawson's perception narrowed to a single point of existence. He heard a shout from Duncan, felt a final thrust, then another. He felt his own body, his genitals, tighten then explode. For a moment he thought he heard the cry of hundreds, their laughter, their need. Then silence, a fall from the mountain into the stars....

"You are wonderful, Joe."

Duncan's voice, still hoarse, was close to his ear. Joe blinked, taking a deep breath as his mind became aware of various sensations throbbing through his body, pleasant sensations. Dawson was on his back. Duncan was kneeling beside him, washing him with a damp cloth.

"Oh, god," he grunted.

"Don't I get any credit?" Duncan asked plaintively.

Dawson smiled, gathering whatever energy he could muster to touch the immortal's face. "You're beautiful."

"Then you're beyond beauty, Joe." Duncan put aside the used cloth he held then lay down by Dawson, pulling the Watcher against him. "Go to sleep. I'll make breakfast in the morning."

"I thought your neighbor was the cook," Dawson countered, completely at ease in MacLeod's arms.

Duncan snorted. "I learned how to cook...when I was about a century old. Connor taught me."

Falling into slumber, Dawson merely smiled. "I like my eggs sunny-side up," he requested.

"Done," Duncan agreed.

It was the last word the American heard as his well-satisfied, but exhausted body gave into a healing sleep.

**********

The sound of a ship's horn, its bells crept into Dawson's dreams, then into his consciousness. Joe breathed deeply. The smell of cooking bacon, eggs and fresh brewed coffee filled his nostrils. The Watcher rolled over onto his back, coming fully awake in an instant.

"I can't believe it! You and him?!"

Joe pulled himself up on his elbows as the familiar voice reached him. It was morning. He was on a boat, Duncan's barge, in Duncan's bed. And last night...

"Richie, shut up."

Duncan MacLeod's words were sharp, but lacked anger or warning. On the other side of the barge, Richie Ryan stood in the small galley. The young man faced MacLeod who had on a shirt and a pair of briefs.

*Two immortals*, Dawson observed, though, as a Watcher, only he knew of Richie Ryan was now an immortal. *Another rule broken. Joseph?*

*The kid still looks his age.* his conscience countered. *Who would notice for the next ten years. Why make him a target?*

"Mac," Richie seem to be in the middle of an argument with Duncan. The Highlander had his hands on his hips, an annoyed but patient expression plastered on his face.

"You should have knocked," MacLeod chided, speaking each word precisely. He turned back to the small stove, turning bacon. "But since you didn't, you're going to have to keep this a secret. Do you understand?"

Ryan looked to the older immortal, his expression one of a naughty child caught in the act. He shrugged. "Yeah. I didn't see a thing," he promised. He reached around Duncan to grab something from a bowl on the counter next to the stove. MacLeod smacked his hand.

"Go away for twenty minutes so I can get Joe up and then you can eat." MacLeod stared at the boy. "Go!"

Richie saluted quickly, then swiped his hand into the bowl again before Duncan could stop him. "Gotcha!" He bit into the biscuit he held, walking away towards the steps leading out. It was then he caught sight of Dawson. He stopped dead in his tracks, his mouth opening.

Joe raised a hand, ordering him to remain silent. Ryan's bright blue eyes raked over him. For the first time, Dawson realized he was completely exposed, even his amputated stumps were open to the boy's scrutiny. He resisted the urge to cover himself and instead waited for Richie to have his reaction.

The boy's inquisitive eyes fixed on Dawson's legs, then met the Watcher's gaze. Ryan's face lost all emotion, then changed. He grinned, then winked, raising the uneaten portion of his biscuit in salute before running up the steps and out the door.

Feeling warmed by the unquestioned acceptance, Joe settled himself back into bed, ignoring the growls from his empty stomach. He had the feeling Duncan wanted to give him a special wake-up call and would not disappoint him.

And five minutes later, as food sat on the table, ready to eat. Dawson felt Duncan's lips on his face, then his chest, moving downward in slow seduction...

Joseph Dawson was not disappointed.

the end

# DEMON DREAMS

## by Emerys

Avon reached out his hand and Cally took it between her own smaller ones.

*Rest, Avon. You will feel better if you sleep for just a little while.*

Avon nodded to Cally's thoughts. Yes, he would sleep for a time and then the lights and the dizzying colors would vanish. Cally was the only image he could see clearly and even if he would never admit it, he was glad she was here with him. The Scorpio's crew would never believe that Avon wanted or required anyone's company or assistance. He sighed as the cool, damp cloth was draped across his brow, taking away some of the heat.

Frightened, he called out for her as his mind flashed vivid images of an explosion. "Cally!" Those dreams again where she died on a planet called Terminal. He, Avon, would make sure none of them ever visited that place.

Her soothing voice flowed through his troubled mind, caressing him.

*Sleep, Avon.*

He snuggled down into the scant covers and drifted off.

**********

Vila softly drew the damp cloth over the dark haired dreamer's brow. Avon smiled as he turned his head toward the smaller man. "Thank you, Cally." he mumbled.

Vila sighed. It was starting again, the drug induced visions of Cally who had been dead since Terminal. He had to find out how the drug was being administered to Avon and stop this. If Avon remembered even half of what he said or thought while in this condition, the man would be impossible to live with forever. Of course, this was assuming they lived long enough to escape. And 'this condition' was not getting any better. Vila was sure the dosage was being increased.

In normal circumstances, Vila could have gotten them out their accommodations in a few seconds. But, the small problem of high voltage doors was taking a little longer to fix since he had no tools to break the circuits. He felt worse than drugged when he woke up and pulled himself way from the not so soft far wall after his first attempt at lock picking. Of course, the tasks were always easier when the locks were visible. All the other unsuccessful attempts had been much more carefully planned, but hadn't gone any further as no remedy to the problem had presented itself. No worry, he wasn't the best lockpick in half a galaxy without reason. Hadn't he heard somewhere that the impossible just took longer? *Huh, was probably Blake!*

**********

Avon twisted on the narrow cot. He called for her again, but there was no answer.

"CALLY! CALLY! CALLY!! CALLY!! CALLY!!!" echoed around and around and around.

He could hear someone calling to him but the voice didn't belong to Cally. It was male. He fought to rise, but hands held him firmly in place. "No I have to stop her, she can't go in there. CALLY!!"

Demon reflections of heat and fire consumed him. "CALLY!" Where had she gone. *SHE WAS GONE!* "NOOOO!" the screams reverberated around the cavern surrounding him.

Sinking deeper into his nightmare, Avon lashed out and backhanded the figure keeping him from Cally. Not expecting the blow, the demon holding him to the bed lost it's grip and Avon stumbled from the cot. Legs giving way, he landed in a heap across someone. "Cally?"

*Shush, sleep Avon . It was only a dream. I'm right here with you. I won't leave you, I promise. I promise, Avon. I won 't leave and I won't betray you to anyone.*

Hands stroked his face, the voice calming his struggles. Avon allowed Cally to help him back to the sweat soaked cot. Cool hands were there to take away the flames dancing though the corridors of confusion in his tortured brain. Hands which helped him out of the damp shirt and a low voice which bade him to swallow the liquid, sliding down his throat to put out the ache from lack of moisture. He slid softly into sleep again, comforted by her presence.

**********

"Well, Vila, have you found a way to get us out of this prison?"

Vila struggled to bring his thoughts back in line *Oh great, Avon, awake and questioning. How long before he remembered the dreams?'*

No, Avon, as we're still here, even you should be able to tell I haven't gotten the bloody doors unlocked."

"Then why are you just sitting there, get to work."

"I was working, considering the options, so to speak. That is I was, until you interrupted my train of thought."

"Why, Vila, thoughts! I didn't know you had it in you."

"Avon, if you're not going to help me, why don't you just go back to sleep and let me get on with this."

A haunted look flitted through the dark eyes appraising him. If Vila hadn't known what was going on, he probably would have missed the exchange. But no, he had seen the expression on Avon's face. The man was afraid.

*Please don't let him remember till after I can get us out of here. There has got to be a way. Think, Vila, think!*

Still very shaky on his feet after the repeated drugging, Avon staggered across the room to the door. He stole a quick look at in the Delta's direction. Vila looked OK, no noticeable harm done to him other than he seemed incredibly tired, as though he hadn't slept for days. Could their

situation be bothering him that much? He didn't look particularly frighten, which was the emotion Avon would have expected from the thief.

*Why do I feel so weak, almost tortured. But I have no injuries and Vila doesn't look anything like I feel.*

It hit him then, the look on Vila's face. He KNEW what was going on and was hiding the truth of their situation from him. He spun around and startled a look of expectation off the thief's face.

*What did Vila expect him to do that would put that look on his features. as though whatever it was, was going to hurt Avon and not him?*

"Vila, what are you hiding?"

"Hiding? Me, Avon?. Why nothing, you see everything we have here to see. No place to hide anything. Why don't you stop pacing, our dinner should be arriving soon," the thief babbled

As Avon stalked towards him, a peculiar whining seemed to vibrate in his ears. The technician stopped, his expression changing as sweat suddenly poured off his body. Vila tried to reach him before he hit the floor but as he had been in motion to avoid Avon, he wasn't able to change directions fast enough.

Hands clutched at him, begging him not to let go. "Cally, don't leave me here! Please, Cally, please!" the voice continued to plead.

Vila tightened his hold and pulled Avon into his arms, hugging them tightly together. Avon's labored breathing slowed and his glazed eyes slid shut and the thief wondered what reassurances Cally's silent voice was imparting to the man whose consciousness was ebbing away. He hoped that whatever it was, it would come true and translate into their escape from this chamber.

**********

*You're safe here, Avon. Safe with me. Nothing can hurt you here. I won't let anything ever hurt you again. Hold on to me and let me heal away the pain.*

Avon wrapped his arms tightly around Cally and held on. She would keep him safe, he knew that now. Knew beyond any doubt, that finally he had found someone he could trust. Someone who would never be able to betray him. Cally could read him, knew how much he loved and trusted her to keep him safe. She knew he could never tell her these things, not aloud, only in the safety of their minds. And she understood, he could feel her acceptance and understanding of his nature flooding through him. He sighed and let the ambient joy surround him as he drifted into a healing sleep.

Tears ran unchecked down the Delta's face as he listened to the dreamer's tale. Avon would die of despair, the betrayal of his own mind would be more than he would be able to withstand. He held on tighter.

*Please Tarrent, find us soon and get us out of here!*

**********

Vila sat quietly by the cot, the inevitable damp cloth over Avon's fevered brow. He was musing on this last attack. Avon had been coming for him and then just stopped when he had more felt than heard the strange vibration. Methodically, he began checking the uncovered parts of Avon's body for new scars. Nothing. The dark haired man moaned.

"Sleep, Avon, it's going to be OK," the thief muttered. He combed his hands through the restless sleeper's hair and then stopped. Turning Avon's head away from him, he explored the roughness more thoroughly.

The smaller man slumped away, his back to the cot and holding his head in his hands. It wasn't a drug. It was some kind of implant and these bastards were using it to control Avon's dreams and the hallucinations. He couldn't stop that from here.

For all he knew, they could still induce the dreams from a hundred light years away. Or maybe only inside this room. Didn't matter if they couldn't get out. Avon's dreams were getting longer and the periods between them were unfortunately becoming shorter. Soon, he would never be awake at all and Vila wouldn't have any time at all to spend on freeing them.

As he moved away to examine the door one more time, the figure on the bed began thrashing about. Vila hurried back over and began the litany of cool cloths and comforting, meaningless words one more time. Hell, Avon was just as responsible for keeping him from attempting to get them out as their captors were. Maybe more so with this behavior. Vila wondered if his friends on the Scorpio were even looking for them. They had to know he and Avon were missing long before now.

The thief hated these blank, gray walls just staring back at him as he waited. His escape plans were no where and without knowledge of how far they had been taken, he wasn't sure escaping this room would do any good.

He realized Avon thought they were still on Damos VI. Vila only had vague memories of his cell on the ship which had transported the captives to the new location. Avon hadn't been confined with him during the trip and when he had been reunited with the computer tech, Avon was already in this dream/drugged state. Their kidnappers must know about his talent, for there was nothing to work with in the cell. Even the food they received was all hand food, not a utensil in sight. And no door or light controls, just food and water through an out of reach slot which slid back into the seamless walls after each deposit. Vila decided he was only along as nursemaid. The fever which always accompanied the dreams must be caused by the implant so he continued his task. What else was there to do.

**********

Avon watched as though from a distance as Cally's gray clad figure disappeared down the corridor. "No", he moaned softly. "You promised you wouldn't leave." He followed. She could not go away and leave him. He wouldn't let that happen. He just wouldn't. Avon rounded the corner to see Cally stopped ahead just out of reach.

*I 'm sorry, Avon . It wasn't my choice. I wanted to stay with you, but...*

The figure disappeared beneath the falling rock as the flames from the explosion roared through. Avon felt the scream echo within his mind. Cally's last message to him; her sorrow and her pain echoing around and bouncing off the sharp, raw edges of his tortured skull. The echoes became softer and faded into nothing.

**********

"No!" echoed throughout the dull, gray chamber. Vila leapt to his feet in panic as the figure on the cot convulsed, screaming in heart-rending terror and pain. "No, you promised, you promised!"

Vila threw himself across the writhing body to hold Avon even partially on the bedding. The screams intensified as the man's unconscious mind felt the physical restraint. He tried to throw the thief off his body, but Vila had been thorough this before. *This* was undoubtedly the worst episode so far. He wound his fingers in the tech's short hair to hold the thrashing head still.

"Avon, Avon, listen to me." he pleaded. "Avon, wake up. Avon, everything will be OK, if you wake up."

The form beneath him began to relax. Vila released his hold on the strands of hair and found himself flying in the air as Avon launched him across the chamber. He heard his head crack as he connected with the wall, but nothing else registered as the lights went out.

**********

He awoke to sobs and saw that Avon was lying by the cot, pulled into himself. Vila crawled over, head throbbing, vision blurred. He, at least, knew better than to try to get up.

Avon was chilled from the sweat which still coated his body, but the fever raged. The shaking, sweat covered man scared Vila more than he was willing to admit so he pulled the skimpy blanket from the cot and wrapped both the blanket and his body around his sobbing friend. As the warmth from the coverings began to seep into Avon, Vila felt himself slipping away softly this time. "It will just have to do," was the last thing he remembered thinking as consciousness left him.

Avon felt the walls crash down on him as they had on Cally. It didn't hurt, but he already hurt too much to feel more pain. And the flames didn't touch him. He fought to free himself, to try to reach out to Cally. He knew she was still here. He had to find her. Now! She couldn't be gone. He wouldn't let her be gone. He relaxed for a moment as the voice reached him.

CALLY?

"No" exploded from his ravaged throat as he heaved and squirmed to extricate himself from the tangle of debris.

He fell a short distance. His attempts to rise were impeded by his body's refusal to hold him up. He lay shivering on the cold, unyielding surface, sobbing. He could see Cally dimly through the tears streaming down his face.

She was only a few feet away, but his body would not obey his commands to get to her. One hand was flung out to him, the skin burned, blackened. The scalding liquid leaking from his eyes prevented him from focusing on her face. "Cally?" The whisper was barely audible in the still room.

"CALLY!" Avon folded in upon his own form. The fetal ball quivered in despair. Alone.

**********

Avon woke, but didn't move. If his head pounded this bad, moving any other part was simply unthinkable. Maybe he could pry open one eyelid. Maybe. Warmth radiated down his back, but he was sure there was a floor under him instead of a bed. *Why am I sleeping on the floor?*

Memory returned. He and Vila had been captured on Damos VI and the Scorpio's crew hadn't rescued them. Yet. It was odd, but he couldn't seem to remember how long they had been in this rotten prison. He would have to push Vila harder to get those doors open. When he had a bit more energy.

One eyelid slowly lifted. Yes, this was certainly the floor.

*Where in hell was Vila?*

Avon's sluggish brain considered the warm spot behind him.

"Cally?"

*Cally, now where had that come from? Cally died on Terminal. Wretched place.*

The dark head lifted and turned to focus on the form behind him.

*Vila? Why was he sleeping on the floor with Vila pressed up against him?* The body warmth was welcomed, but why? Avon decided he had too many whys and no action.

He shifted himself away from the sleeping lump, one aching, creaking joint at a time and used his returning faculties to absorb the situation. He, Vila and the blanket had the floor, but the single cot could have hosted a major skirmish. No food or clean linens had been delivered, but a pile of used rags lay by the head of the cot. He ached all over and his clothes felt as if he had lived in them since Terminal. Why did Terminal keep popping up in this thoughts? Later. And there was blood on the wall.

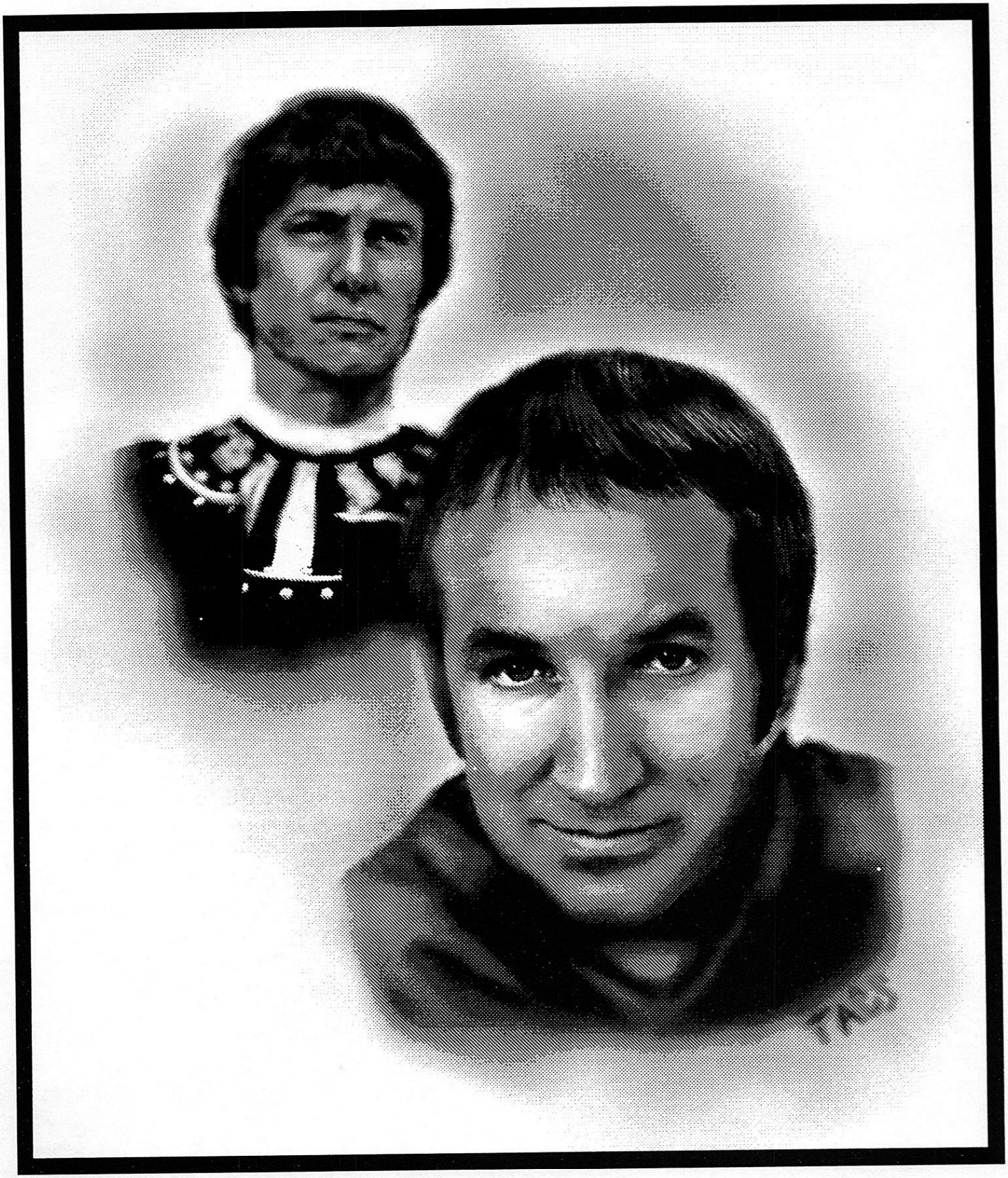
Avon started at the wall, willing it to give him answers to the exponentially increasing whys. His gaze went back to Vila. A very pale, still heavily sleeping Vila with dried blood matted in his light brown mop. Avon leaned over the thief and ran one hand over the mess. Vila's skull had an oozing lump. This one's headache was going to outdistance Avon's when he came to.

An interminable half hour later, Avon had Vila sprawled across the cot and he even had his breathing back to a near normal level. A moan interrupted his scattered musings. Vila blinked unfocused orbs at him. As he leaned closer, the thief mumbled, "It's OK, it will all be better Avon. Go back to sleep." The eyes rolled up and the lids slip back down.

"Vila, Vila!" Avon ceased shaking the thin shoulder as he realized he would get no answers now. Vila was out cold again. He used one of the rags to clean some of the blood out of the matted hair. Sitting with his back to the cot, he let his head roll back and drifted back to sleep himself. Whatever Vila was talking about, was just another why.

Vila woke slowly and moaned as the opening of his eyes proved to be quite painful. A voice thundered through his head.

"Vila, wake up."



The thief focused on the figure kneeling by the cot. Moaning, he continued, "Don't shout, Avon." His own whisper reverberated inside his skull at only slightly less volume than the other's voice had been.

Avon sat back on his heels. "I didn't shout and I want to know what happened to you."

"To me?" Vila looked incredulous that Avon would even dare to question him on the past few days events.

"Vila, did the Damosians who captured us, hurt you?"

The smaller man blinked. Avon was so far off base his disjointed brain couldn't come up with any logical answer, truth or lie.

"Vila, do you remember what happened?" Avon's patience had disappeared and if he didn't still feel as bad as Vila looked, he would have shaken the answers out of the thief.

"I remember some." Avon was not going to wait any longer. He couldn't tell the whole truth, *Gee Avon, we aren't on Damos, you think Cally's alive and loves you and I enjoyed keeping you warm on the floor. Hope you had a good time too.* No, not if he wanted to live.

"You were having a nightmare. When I tried to wake you, you threw me up against the wall. I really don't remember anything else."

"I hurt you?"

"It was a dream, Avon. I was careless and you didn't' know it was me.

"And the floor?"

Vila knew if there was any color left in his face, it had drained away. "The floor?"

"When I woke up, we were both on the floor, sleeping together."

"I'm on the cot, Avon, not the floor. I don't remember anything after I hit the wall." Deny everything, that always worked.

Avon didn't look convinced, but then decided to let that one slide. For now. There were more important matters to address.

"Vila, how many days have we been here? What's been happening to me? Don't lie, I know you know and I want answers!"

Vila's mind locked. He just blinked wide, staring eyes at Avon. *Tell Avon? How? There was just no explaining this.*

Avon advanced upon the poor, mussy headed thief.

"Vila."

"I don't know what you want from me! I told you what happened."

"Not what happened today, what happened since we've been here. What has been done to me?"

"Avon, I...you don't...my head hurts."

"Not as much as it's going to, Vila."

He pursed his lips, teeth showing on the bottom one. "Avon, we aren't on Damos VI. I remember the ship we were transported off in. You weren't kept with me then. I don't know where they kept you or what happened to you on the ship." He couldn't look at the stunned features so he dropped his gaze.

"You've been having these dreams, I don't know what about. They're giving you the dreams, but I don't know how."

*Don't let him know I'm lying, please don't let him see the lie.*

"I don't know long we've been here or where we are, I don't know how long it took to get to this place and I don't know if anyone from the Scorpio knows what happened. Is there anything else you think I know?"

He heard Avon's butt hit the floor as he abruptly sat. He looked up to meet shocked eyes. "We're not on Damos VI?"

Vila nodded no.

Avon nodded back. *So be it. He's still hiding something. I don't need any more surprises.*

"Avon get up here and go back to sleep, you need to rest."

"With you?"

"You shouldn't get cold again."

"I was cold?"

"You were freezing."

Avon nodded and crawled into the small space left by the Delta. He turned his back on the thief and felt Vila do the same to him, probably because he could feel how uncomfortable the Alpha was with this situation. But Vila was correct, his mind needed to rest, else it would explode. They would figure out how to get out of here later. When just plain, simple reasoning didn't give them both pounding headaches.

**********

*Avon, where are you. I've been looking for you. Avon, come to me. I missed you.*

Avon saw Cally reaching out her hand to him. He smiled at her and lifted his own hand to take hers. She drew him to her and he rested his head on her shoulder and nuzzled at her neck.

*I wouldn't leave you, I promised to stay with you Avon. I promised.*

Avon snuggled down with Cally and drifted back to sleep as her hands caressed his back and neck. Soothing. Comforting

Vila woke to a hard, warm body rubbing against him. *What?* He knew he had gone to sleep sharing a very small cot with Avon. *So who's nuzzling my neck?* His nose confirmed that he was still sharing a very small cot with Avon. *Avon?* Then the low moan crystallized in his gut.

"Cally, you feel nice."

Vila moaned. *Not again! Not like this.* If Avon had ever been kind to him on a regular basis, he would have considered him as a potential lover years ago. But not as a substitute for a hallucination of a dead woman.

Vila wrapped his arms around the male form and began caressing his back and neck. "Sleep, Avon. Go back to sleep. We'll figure this out later, I promise." The body against him relaxed and snuggled in closer. Deep, even breathing whispered across his neck as Avon drifted down into sleep.

Vila held his companion, mind dashing around in confusion. *How far should I let this go? If I don't watch out, there is no telling how far Avon could take this in his state. I want to be with Avon, but only if he is awake and aware of who he's making love with.*

And he should be very careful of this situation. The periods of quiet were often followed by the violent hallucinations. His head hadn't recovered from the last bout and he didn't need further close encounters with the wall to remind him of the danger.

Vila admitted to himself that he had given up hope of rescue. He might not know how much time had passed since they had been captured, but he did acknowledge that far too long had passed to reasonably expect release by Tarrent or the Scorpio's crew. If the others hadn't found them by now, it was not going to happen. Avon was going to get the truth from him soon, he knew this because he couldn't continue to lie. The computer tech already suspected him of withholding information.

The thief sighed sadly. He leaned forward and kissed Avon lightly on the forehead while gently brushing the hair out of his eyes. The dark locks had needed trimming before the captivity began. Might as well enjoy this while he could. The Delta shifted them to a more comfortable position to wait.

**********

*Avon, we have to go. We must get out of here immediately. Avon, wake up! Please!*

Hands grabbed at him and pulled him awake. "Cally, what.."

*Not now, Avon, there's no time. Come on!*

He stumbled to his feet and raced through the corridors after Cally. A wall materialized directly in front of them.

Unable to slow their momentum, they both slammed into the hard surface. Avon screamed as the pain ripped through him and he felt himself throw back.

"AVON!"

He realized someone was calling him, but he couldn't respond as the dark carried him away.

**********

Vila sat bolt upright as the scream blasted throughout the chamber. He fixed his gaze on the figure sliding down the wall. He blinked and then leapt off the cot and ran to the fallen man.

"Avon, can you hear me?" He shook the nearest shoulder gently. "Avon?" The man's head fell back against the wall and somewhat crossed eyes fixed on a point some distance beyond Vila.

"Wha..?"

Here, let me sit you down." Vila lowered the shuddering form to the floor. Avon's gaze locked with Vila, but it was quickly apparent he was not aware of who he was seeing.

"Cally, did we make it?"

"Oh god, not again." Vila let his hands run over Avon to check for unseen damage, lingering in the soft waves. He sighed and pulled the dazed man up with the intent to get Avon back to the cot. Avon had other ideas. He gripped Vila's upper arms painfully, demanding, "Cally, where are we? Did we get out?"

What to say, go along or deny? "Avon, we're OK."

The grip released and the exhausted form relaxed. "Help me up."

Vila grasped Avon's hand and hauled him to his feet. He began guiding him toward the cot, but stopped as Avon draped an arm across his shoulders and pulled him back. "Cally, come here. I need you."

Vila froze in uncertainty. "Avon?," he began but was stopped by the dark haired man's mouth as it met his. He gripped Avon's shoulder's to push him away, but his body overruled him and pulled his companion closer as the kiss deepened. As they broke apart for air, Avon whispered "Cally".

Intense pain filled Vila's gut as he shoved Avon from him and stumbled away. No, he couldn't do this. He thought he would gladly take the other man, anytime and under any conditions, but this was too painful. He had not realized it would hurt this much.

Gentle hands eased onto his shoulders and he found he was kneeling on the floor by their disreputable cot. "What's wrong, I didn't mean to hurt you." Avon knelt behind him and pulled him back against his chest.

"Let me go, Avon. I can't deal with this. Please, just let me go!"

"Cally--I don't understand. You promised." The whisper was agonized.

Tears ran down the thief's face. No matter what his final decision came to be, it would ultimately be a betrayal of Avon's trust. He had never felt so cold or so alone in his life. He had not thought anything could surpass the pain of his past existence, but this was totally unthinkable.

He was turned into the responsive embrace as Avon pressed their bodies together. As his back was caressed, the thief relaxed into the warm comfort.

"Tell me what is wrong. Shush, don't cry. Don't cry! Cally, please!" Vila tried, but he couldn't choke any response past his dry throat.

*I'm all right, Avon, really. It 's just that I've waited so long. I promised I wouldn't leave you. But I'm afraid that you'll leave me.*

"Ah, Cally, no, no. I would never leave you here. Not now. Please believe me, please!"

*I believe you Avon. I believe in you.*

"Cally." The name was just a breath. Avon closed the remaining distance and brushed his lips across the soft ones offered to him. He deepened the kiss and let his hands glide down the woman's spine to caress her soft cheeks. Grasping firmly, he pulled her against his lower body. "Cally, please."

*Avon, I love you. I want you.*

Avon was released by the voice speaking softly in his thoughts. He lifted Cally and himself to their feet only to fall back onto the cot on his back. Cally shifted over him, fitting her contours to his own. He moaned and rolled them over, Cally resting with her back to the wall and hands gliding over Avon's face.

The tears continued to slip down Vila's face. His back to the wall, he caressed Avon's face, kissing the darker man in desperation. Locking his fingers into the ebony strands of hair, Vila thrust his lower body into the larger man's groin. Avon responded, grasping the slighter man's hips and pining him between the wall and his own thrusting hips.

"Cally..." Avon's hands were everywhere, pulling at Vila's clothing.

Vila moaned into Avon's mouth, his attempts to control his body and his tears in vain. Breaking their kiss, he sobbed, "Avon, please, wake up. Please!" The thief pushed at Avon's chest with his fists, unable in his anguish to unclench his hands. He body instinctively continued to rub his hardness against the larger man's rigid shaft.

Avon's hands slid between their bodies, searching for Cally's soft entrance and met...not a female. Cally WAS an alien, however, normal MALE genitalia was definitely not expected. Especially fully aroused male genitalia. The brown eyes flew open to search Cally's features, but that was not the face before him. He jerked back, hands grabbing Vila's shoulders to prevent himself from tumbling to the floor. "Vila...?" he whispered, eyes darting from the tear streaked countenance to their semi-unclad state and raging erections. The fisted hands on his chest slowly relaxed as the thief's eyes focused on his face.

"Avon? Do you know me?" sighed out of the trembling lips.

"Vila, what's going on?" Avon's confused mind could not come up with an explanation for this situation. He shook his head, but the pounding in his brain would not leave off. "Vila," he tried again, "Explain."

The smaller man shoved the tech away and as the thud of the dark haired man's body connecting with the floor echoed around the room, Vila huddled himself under the inadequate blanket and endeavored to become one with the wall. Anything to escape.

Avon lay on the hard floor, catching his breath. Cally, he knew he had been making love with her. But Cally's dead, Cally's dead. But if she is dead, why do I...did I feel she was with me. Vila knows.

The quiet sobs of his friend filtered into his consciences. Turning his head, Avon observed the small form curled upon itself on the cot. He levered himself up, crawled onto the cot and pulled the slight figure into a tight embrace. Vila fought to free his hold on him, but the bigger man curled his own body around the thief's, holding him tighter and murmuring nonsense. "Shush, it's OK, it's going to be OK, now." Vila subsided and allowed his exhausted body to drift away into a much needed slumber. Avon rested his chin on the crown of the man's head and let his mind wander.

*I really believed it was Cally. Oh, god, Cally's gone.*

Remnants of his dreams filled his mind. Cally's love flooded through him and her death choked him. His thoughts almost clear for the first time in weeks, he fought to arranged his scattered memories. Visions of Cally telling him of her love, lying dead under the rubble of Terminal, leading him away from danger and into pain, all jumbled around.

*Focus, Avon, get it together!* he told himself.

Visions of Vila wiping the sweat from his body, telling him that he was working on their escape and handing him food, overlaid the visions of Cally. *I'll have to stay aware until Vila wakes up. I can't let myself fall back into the Cally visions, wherever they came from.* Rubbing fingers against his scalp to ease the throbbing headache, his body stiffened. He probed the lump hiding at he base of his skull with two inquiring digits.

*Implant!* his mind screamed. *Where the hell are we and what is going on?*

**********

Vila felt warm and loved. He snuggled closer to the warm body holding him and sighed. Pure bliss to be held like this after all the anguish of the past weeks. Memory flooded in. Gasping, he pushed away from the confining arms and his shocked gaze met Avon's.

"Glad to see you're awake, Vila. How do you feel?"

"Ah..I..uh..Avon?" he swallowed. Heart pounding, he searched the brown eyes locked with his. They seemed sane and Avon had said 'Vila'. Not Cally, but Vila. He swallowed again.

"Avon?

"I remember Vila. I remember a lot of things."

"It's all right. I don't blame you for what's happened. I just want to know."

"Know what?"

"Everything, Vila. Everything that I don't already remember."

Vila nodded. "Okay."

Avon touched the protrusion covering the implant on his scalp. "Do you know about this?"

"Only that it's there. I think it's where the dreams are coming from. I only found it the other day. I guess you've had it since the ship."

The darker man nodded and turned his face away. "Vila, about what happened.."

Caressing fingers covered Avon's lips. "Don't say anything. I understand who you thought you were with. I.." The dark gaze silenced his protests as the lips nuzzled his fingers. Avon's eyes wouldn't release him. A digit was sucked into the wet mouth and gently bathed by a rough tongue before it was allowed escape. Vila felt his breath catch as his heart began to race.

"A...Avon?"

"I remember a lot of things." Avon pulled Vila back into his arms, hugging them together and rocking slowly, soothingly. Vila moaned and raised his face, blindly seeking the other's lips. As his mouth was captured by warm lips, his hands dug into Avon's hair, holding the larger man closer.

The tech pulled away. "Open your eyes, Vila." When he was staring into his eyes, he continued. "I won't forget, Vila."

The thief smiled and hauled Avon back to him. "I won't let you forget," he murmured as their lips met again.

**********

Avon reclined on the cot, Vila asleep in his arms again. He felt as if he had been beaten, his body ached all over. He dimly recalled hitting the electrified doorway in his last hallucination of Cally. That really scared him. He could remember. Why now and not before? What were their captors planning? If they had finished with the 'experiment' for want of a better word, would they continue with the care and feeding of the duo? Would the visions return? Or would Vila start having hallucinations now? He ran exploratory hands over the sleeper's scalp, but no evidence of an implant like his own was discovered. Could it be hidden elsewhere? Avon smiled a decided smug little grin. That wasn't likely. He would have found it in his earlier exploration of the thief's body.

The smile disappeared as his arms tightened reflexively around Vila's sleeping form. The door which was hardly evident in the bare, gray walls slid back into the wall. He could feel Vila stirring against him as the smaller man began to waken.

"Vila," he hissed as he slid from under the thief's body and to his feet. Vila abruptly came to his senses as Avon's warning slammed into his fuzzy brain. He struggled to his feet and stood beside the cot, one hand holding himself steady against the wall.

Tarrent and Dayna flowed through the open doorway, weapons drawn against possible, probable danger. They rose out of their crouched positions as the awareness that Avon and Vila were the only occupants of the small enclosure sank in.

Dayna hurried over to them, concern covering her features. She placed a comforting hand on Vila's arm. "Are you two okay?"

He nodded as Avon responded in his usual gruff way, "Of course, we are 'Okay'. And what took you so long, Tarrent?"

Ignoring the younger man's glare, he bent to retrieve his shirt from it's resting place on the floor. "We had some trouble locating you after we realized you were no longer on Damos VI," he explained. "However, Orac was able to trace your whereabouts."

"And just 'whereabouts' are we? And who has us?"

"No one has you."

Vila and Avon exchanged blank stares and both turned back to Tarrent. Vila looked confused and Avon's glare could have cut through the walls.

"We're the only ones on the entire planet." Dayna volunteered.

"What?"

"There is no one here except for us. Everything appears to be automated."

Avon turned to her, "Are there any signals being sent out?"

"No signals are going out. The communication equipment looks to have been destroyed, possibly when the station was abandoned."

"But what about the ship that brought us here?" Vila questioned.

Dayna passed both men teleport bracelets. Tarrent shook his head. "There's not any ship here now "

Avon rubbed the back of his head. "Let's get out of here."

Vila nodded his agreement as Tarrent spoke, "Soolin, four to teleport now."

**********

Back on Scorpio, both Vila and Avon appeared very subdued by their captivity. The operation to remove the implant from Avon's scalp had been successfully completed, but not even Orac could trace the device or the beings responsible for the abduction of their shipmates.

Vila excused himself from the evenings entertainment and made his way slowly back to his cabin. He knew Avon would never make any reference to what had happened between the two men now they were back on their own ship. The hand which grasped his arm and turned him to face Avon was wholly unexpected. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I.. I'm going to bed, Avon. Why?"

"You've gone too far. My cabin is back this way."

"But, I thought..."

Avon's hand moved up to caress the thief's face. "You thought wrong," he stated quietly as he took Vila's hand in his own. Vila smiled and allowed himself to be pulled along by his lover, not alone anymore.

The End

# HAMMER TO FALL

## By Katrinka

**This is a Pros/Son of Darkness/FK slash story. Son of Darkness is a movie that Michael Praed starred in. He plays a good guy vampire called Max Shreck, who is really Dracula.**

"The city is gripped in fear as the escaped wolf has yet to be found. There have been sixteen bodies found so far," The DJ on the radio said. Someone who called himself the Nightcrawler. "The sightings of the wolf are now in the thousands. The reward for the capture has now been increased to one hundred thousand dollars. Police warn not to try to capture the wolf yourself. My children, I hope you do as the police ask. A horrible crime like this gives the city a very bad name."

Suddenly Ray Doyle reached over and turned off the radio. The man who was driving the car looked over to him.

"Why did you turn off the radio?"

"I don't like the DJ., he's creepy." Doyle admitted.

"He's an acquired taste,"

Doyle was part of a CI5-Canadian police exchange and for the past few days, he had been partnered with Detective Nick Knight. Nick looked more like a member of CI5 then a police force; he wasn't uniformed, wore black leather and also drove his own car. He was all right - but he wasn't Bodie. He wished Bodie would have been able to get there immediately.

"When's your partner's flight getting in?" Nick asked, changing the subject.

"He's due in around two a.m." Doyle told him. "Do you think we'll be through with the crime scene by then?"

Nick glanced at his watch. "It's eleven now, so we probably will." He paused. "With all these killings, I'm glad that Nat and Tracey are in London."

"Who are Nat and Tracey?"

"Tracey's my partner," Nick explained. "Natalie is the station's coroner, but, she's also a...close friend of mine."

There was no need to explain further, it was quite obvious that Nick cared for Natalie deeply.

Doyle looked out at the road as Nick drove. The usually busy streets where almost clear because of the attacks. It all seemed so surreal to him and he wondered, yet again, how a wolf could escape from the local zoo and go on such a broad killing streak without being caught.

* * *

Ray Doyle had seen many things in his life, but nothing had prepared him for what he was about to see. As he went into the small suburban house, there was a sickly sweet smell that hit him in the face as soon as he entered.

He went through the small entrance with it's paintings and tile floor, into the sitting room where it looked as if someone had splashed red paint everywhere. It was on the walls, the floor and the furniture. It seemed as if nothing had been spared. Knight looked as if he where going to faint. Doyle caught him.

"Will you be all right?"

He pulled away from Doyle. "I'll be fine."

In the middle of the sitting room there was what was once a woman. There were two large claw marks across her chest, large slashing marks that exposed the rib cage. The victim's neck had been torn open. The strange thing was even though there was lots of blood around the room, there was no blood near the victim.

"How could this happen?" Doyle asked.

"It must have been the wolf," Nick said softly. Doyle couldn't help but notice that the officer was still pale.

The CI5 agent commented that the sliding glass door was open. "It must have gotten in through the door.

"There's another one in the kitchen, it's in even worse shape then this one." A passing sergeant said. "You two are in for a fun night."

* * *

The pounding of heavy metal music rocked through the Raven. Bodie stood at the back watching the rock group play. The guitarist looked exotic, with large almond eyes and dark hair so long, it brushed his guitar. The lead singer stood at the mic and sang.

Bodie had only been there a few moments, but he was enjoying the place. It seemed strange to him that vampires would gather in a place so public. Oh, vampires flocked, there was no doubt about that, but in the rest of the world they met in private clubs.

Not a place where anyone off the street could walk in. It made him long for a club like this in Europe. The music stopped and the musician looked across the room to him and smiled. Then he took off his guitar, handed it to a roadie and walked over to Bodie.

"Bodanskya! It's good to see you!"

"I call myself Bodie now," Bodie looked the man over. "What are you calling yourself?"

"Max Shreck."

A smile tugged at Bodie's lips, his brother had taken the name of the man who had once played Dracula! "That's funny Max!"

Max looked him over. "What are you doing in Canada?"

"I'm part of the CI5-Canadian police exchange."

"That's strange, that's why I'm here," Max watched as a girl took the stage and began to strip.

"You're not living in England?"

"I'm filling in for Natalie Lambert, the local coroner, until she returns."

The lead singer of the group came over to them, he looked Bodie over suspiciously. He too had very long hair and looked as if he could be a cousin.

"Who's this, Max?"

"Vachon, this is my brother, Bodie," Max introduced. "Bodie, this is Javier Vachon."

"I'm pleased to meet you," Vachon said, but his dark eyes betrayed his curiosity.

A waiter came over to them and handed Max a note. "There's been another wolf attack, two killed this time."

"Any witnesses?" Bodie asked.

"No, I've got to get to the morgue, want to come along?"

"Why not?"

"I'll come too," Vachon said.

"Of course you'll come."

"Are you sure you should be letting a civilian in on this?" Bodie asked. "This is a police matter."

"I've been a police officer before," Vachon insisted.

Bodie looked the kid over. "Before or after the turn of the century?"

"Come on Bodie," Vachon said. "We both know what the wild dog is, it's a werewolf and I have experience in werewolves. I can at least tell you if one attacked the people that were killed."

"Your coming with us, but you're not to become involved in the investigation," Max said.

Vachon smiled. "What ever you say Max."

* * *

After finishing with the crime scene, Nick took Doyle to the Coroner's office, where they had to get the coroner's report to write their final police report.

Max Shreck was the coroner on duty. His long hair was tied back in a tail and he wore a white lab coat over that. He wasn't alone. Vachon was with him, which really didn't surprise Nick, they were good friends. But the other person did.

It was Bodie. The dark haired man had taken off his leather jacket and had put a white lab coat over his black turtle neck shirt. He was examining the patent along with Max. The golden haired man pushed past Nick.

"Bodie, when did you get into town?"

The Agent looked up to him, "A few hours ago,"

"Why didn't you tell me you were here?" Nick could tell that Doyle was trying hard not to loose his temper.

Bodie shrugged. "Didn't have time, I ran into Max,"

"Max," Doyle said slowly.

"This is Max Shreck, the coroner," Nick introduced.

Max didn't look up, "It's good to finally meet you, Ray, I've heard a lot about you,"

"From Bodie....," Doyle prompted.

"Yes, from Bodie."

Doyle's eyes spied Vachon and he snapped. "Civilians aren't allowed in here,"

"I'm a former cop," Vachon said.

"And I'm Princess Diana," Doyle countered.

"Why don't you sit over there, on the stool?" Max told Vachon. He did, but that didn't surprise Nick, as almost every vampire in the world followed Max's orders.

Bodie looked up to Nick, his sapphire blue eyes hard. "What are you doing here?'

"I'm on the Police force," Nick explained.

"Did you murder these people?"

"I've been working all night with Doyle, if you don't believe me, ask him." Nick said.

"What did you do during your lunch break?"

"I haven't had a lunch break," Nick paused. "I don't kill unless I have too. In all the years we've known each other, have I ever killed an innocent person?"

"What's going on?" Doyle demanded. "Do the two of you know each other?"

"We go a long way back," Bodie said evenly.

"How long?"

"We worked in Africa together,"

A sergeant came in and gave Doyle a message. He glanced at it.

"My superior in London would like for me to call in, I'll be right back." Doyle and the sergeant left.

Nick watched Doyle go. "Does he know you're a vampire, Bodie?"

"What's that got to do with this investigation?" Bodie asked.

"Answer the question," Max ordered.

"If you want to know the truth, he doesn't," Bodie admitted.

"I went through your records," Nick told him. "The two of you have been partners for over fifteen years, yet he's never found out."

"Hasn't he wondered why you haven't aged?" Vachon asked.

It was true, Bodie still looked to be in his late twenties. "No, he hasn't, or at least he hasn't asked me." Bodie shrugged. "I'm good at hiding my vampirism. To survive I have to be."

"Are there any more clues about the killers?" Nick asked, changing the subject.

"The attacker was left handed, so it must have been one of Radu's people."

Max took a deep breath. "I can't put that down on my report? If I put a werewolf did this, the enforcers will swarm down on us."

"It wouldn't do any good," Bodie agreed. "No one has been able to catch Radu, ever."

Vachon turned up the portable radio that was playing in the background. "You've got to hear this."

The unmistakable voice of LaCroix came through.

"There has been a request phoned in for Prince Bodanskya. Come home to your family, or else Radu's dogs will get a taste for English meat. Your brother, of all people, would forgive you for the error of your ways. If you come back home, all will be forgiven. Here's a song, your highness, from your loving brother Radu. It's called 'Keep Yourself Alive'." The unmistakable sound of Queen filled the room and Vachon turned off the radio.

The color had drained from Bodie's face while he was listening to the message. Nick didn't blame him, he understood the message. Radu had threatened Doyle. Bodie was also very quiet, a bad sign for him.

"What are we going to do?" Vachon asked.

"He's not going to join Radu's side for one," Max said. "Is LaCroix involved?"

"It's too soon to tell," Nick said.

"Are you going to join Radu?" Max asked Bodie.

"How can you think I'll join the side of the man that killed most of our family?" Bodie's voice was low, even.

"Someone's going to have to take care of Doyle."

"Ray Doyle is more then capable of taking care of himself," Bodie said.

"Not when it's like this,' Nick said. "If Radu's mob of werewolves are here, then he needs to be protected, that is, unless *you* want to tell him that there are such things as werewolves."

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Bodie said. "The less Ray knows, the better,"

"I have an idea," Max said. "Many of the people that have been killed have come from the bad side of town. During the day, I work at a free clinic. Why don't you suggest to him that he work with me?"

"He'll have to have a reason," Nick said. "You can convince him that working on that part of town would help the case,"

"He's right," Bodie nodded. "Inside, Doyle is still a cop. He still has a strong sense of duty, if he thinks he is really helping, then that would keep him from being suspicious."

"Where can we put him during the night so that he won't be found?" Vachon asked.

"We can use my loft," Nick suggested. "It's got a good security system,"

"I'll need help to watch him," Max said.

"I'll help," Vachon volunteered. "I've got a friend that might lend a hand, too. You're going to have to think of some reason to keep the shutters on the loft shut, not all of us are inherited vampires. Us secondary vampires can't go out during the day."

"We'll think of something,' Nick said. "Perhaps you can share my allergy to sunlight."

* * *

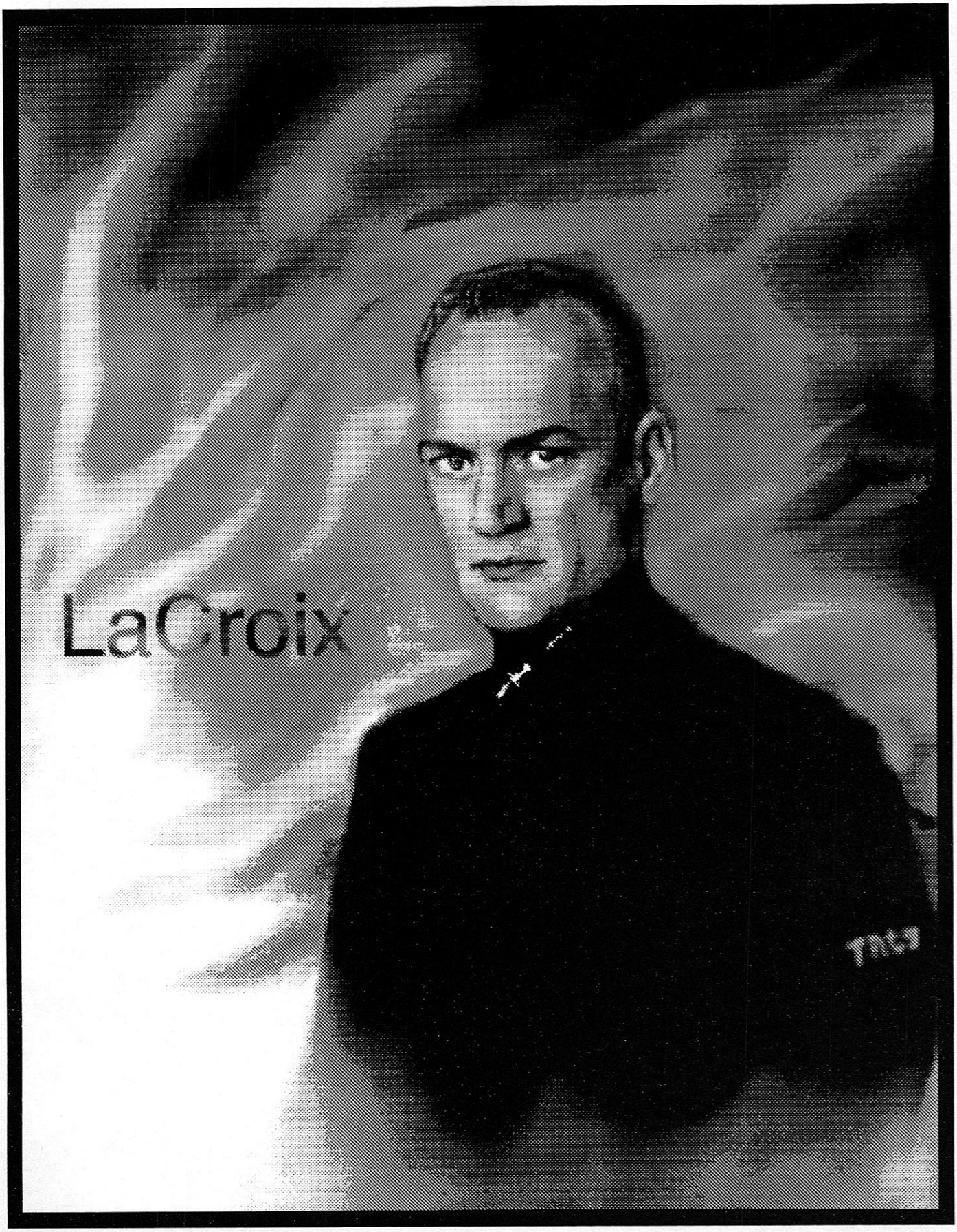
Miklos had just finished filling an order when LaCroix came up to the bar.

"Would you like something to drink, LaCroix?"

"No, I'm not thirsty," LaCroix paused. "I am going out of town for a few weeks and I would like for you to be in charge of the bar until I get back."

"What about your radio show?"

"The station manager is playing re-runs until my return," LaCroix put his keys on the table. "I want you to keep my Bar in the same condition that it was when I left. I don't want to return and find that Radu's burnt the place down."


LaCroix

"You can trust me,"

LaCroix smiled. "I hope you don't betray my trust, Miklos."

"I won't,"

With that, LaCroix left.

Radu suddenly appeared in the bar. Miklos looked up to him.

"Why can't you use the door like everyone else?"

"This way was quicker, I didn't have to wait in line." Radu took a puff of the cigar he was smoking and walked behind the bar, slipping his arms around Miklos and kissing him on the cheek. "We have quite a history don't we Miklos?"

"Yes, we do." Miklos pulled away from him, and filled a patrons drink. "I remember the last time we where together,"

Radu ignored the snub. "It was before the war. I tired to convince you and Bodie to join the Nazi party with me, but you refused.

"I had a feeling that the Nazi's would be defeated,"

"You should have joined. It was like the old times, when we were the princes and humans were our slaves that we could feed from."

Miklos hated that time, but didn't say anything. so Radu continued. "I hope I can persuade you to join my side...and support my claim,"

"What claim?" Miklos feigned ignorance, he knew what Radu wanted, had wanted since the first time he deposed his older brother. "I want to be king of the vampires."

"You're already king of the werewolves,"

"The king of the vampires has much more power." Radu took another puff of his cigar. "Max has gotten soft, he refuses to let anyone kill for food. He thinks we can live on cattle blood."

"I've lived on cattle blood for fifty years."

"It's a very poor substitution for human blood." Radu shrugged. "With the power I get from being King of the vampires, I can disband the enforcers."

"You wouldn't do that!" Miklos gasped.

"Yes, I would Miklos," Radu put his arm around Miklos again, and this time he let him. Max had asked him to spy on Radu and Miklos decided that the best way to spy would be from the inside. "Think of it Miklos, power, absolute power. If I become king, I'll need someone to help me rule, that person can be you."

"I'd be honored to join your side.."

Radu pulled Miklos to him and kissed him, and Miklos let him.

*  *  *

Nick went into the Raven, Bodie following closely behind. The dance floor was packed with people dancing, most of them vampires...and the smell of werewolves hung in the air. Bodie was surprised to see Miklos behind the bar. He was even more surprised when Nick walked over to him. Bodie followed. Miklos looked Bodie over, his gray eyes reveling nothing. "What do I owe the honor of this visit, your highness?"

"I'm here on a police department exchange."

"You're looking good, Zandor,"

"I go by the name Bodie," he snapped.

"Of course, your Highness," Miklos smiled. "How about a drink on the house?" Bodie nodded and Miklos poured a glass of blood. The bartender looked up at Nick. "How about you, Detective Knight?"

"I'm on duty." When he saw Bodie picking up the glass, he said. "So are you, Bodie."

"Can't a man get thirsty once in a while?" Bodie drained the glass and as he did, he surveyed the room. Radu's people where scattered about. So it was true, Radu was here. He should have known it, the attacks were Radu's calling card.

Everytime he went somewhere, attacks like the one he saw earlier happened. At least Doyle was safe with Max. Even Radu wasn't mad enough to kill him when he was in Max's presence.

*I've got to stop thinking of you, Ray .* Bodie thought. *Soon it will be time for me to move on. I've been with CI5 too long as it is and people are beginning to question why I still look so young. Perhaps it is for the best that we never got together.*

Bodie finished his drink and turned back to Miklos. "We've been told that Radu's here,"

"What would make you think that?" Miklos said innocently.

Bodie knew Miklos for too long to believe that story. "What are you hiding, Mik?"

When Miklos didn't answer, Bodie knew the answer, Miklos was working with Radu. He could read it from him like a book.

"We think Radu's responsible for the werewolf attacks," Nick explained. "If he doesn't stop, the enforcers will come in."

"You know how the enforcers are, if they don't get a real lead, they'll destroy every vampire in the city and even my intervention won't save you," Bodie said. "Since you're with Radu, you will die,"

"We need to talk, Bodie," Miklos said.

"Just answer me this, are you working with Radu?"

Miklos looked away. "Yes."

Bodie tried as hard as he could to control his anger, it wouldn't do anyone any good if he killed Miklos here. "Then there's nothing to talk about. "

"This is insane," Miklos said quickly. "We were together too long to go fifty years without talking."

"You made your choice, your going to have to live with it." Bodie followed Nick away from the bar.

Nick turned to him. "What's that all about."

"It's nothing," Bodie said trying to suppress his emotions.

"Bodie, it's me, Nick, you can trust me."

"Miklos betrayed me, like he did before in the past."

"Is that why the two of you broke up in the first place?"

Bodie couldn't believe Nick would ask such a personal question, but he said. "Yes, during World War II, he betrayed me."

***Auschwitz July 29, 1944***

*Miklos walked through the desolation of what was the Gypsy family camp. This was the only family residence that had been allowed to exist, the only place where children weren't destroyed on arrival. Now the news that he had needed to be told to Bodanskya. It was time for them to leave.*

*The smell of burning bodies filled the air, a stench that Miklos couldn't get use to even though he had been an inmate for two years. Going down what passed as a street, he noticed people watching him. Most were children. Skinny, malnourished children that his lover had dedicated his life to try and save.*

*He found Bodanskya dressed in the camp uniform, but wearing a lab coat, kneeling in front of a little boy that looked about two, but whom Miklos knew was really four. Bodanskya examined him with great care.*

*"Your Highness, how's my son?" The child's mother asked in Romany.*

*"He's doing much better, treatment seems to be working." He got up and whispered in the woman's ear. "I'll bring more food for him tonight."*

*The woman nodded. Bodie knelt down again beside the child who looked up at him with one blue eye and one brown, a birth defect that happened more with Romany's. "Take care of your mother for me, Misha." The child flung his arms around Bodie and held him tightly. When he finally let go, Bodanskya got up and walked over to his old friend.*

*"Have you been taking care of children all day?" Miklos asked, there was a bit of scorn in his voice. "You could help Mengle with his experiments."*

*Suddenly Bodie was at Miklos' side, he had his hand wrapped around his lover's throat.*

*"Don't ever say that again!"*

*"You're collaborating with the Nazi's!"*

*"I am not collaborating!" Bodanskya hissed. "I'm only working with the Nazi's to help my people. If I'm collaborating, then why am I high up in the resistance?"*

*"Zandor, they're not your people any more," Miklos tried to reason. "You're a vampire."*

*"I don't give a damn if I'm a vampire or not, these people need me."*

*"You're mad."*

*"Perhaps I am,"*

*"Your Highness, I have some very important news," He told Bodanskya. "News that means that we must leave here."*

*"What kind of news is that?" His friend let go of his neck. "What kind of news is so severe that I would leave my people?"*

*"The Gypsy camp is going to be liquidated."*

*The look of rage that crossed Bodanskya's face made Miklos think twice about telling him anything else.*

*`"Where did you hear that?" The man hissed.*

*"Dr. Mengle told me himself."*

*"When will it happen?"*

*"In two days."*

*"Then there's time to prevent it," Bodanskya paused. "We'll both have to work, but I think we can do it."*

*"No, Zandor, we can't try and stop it."*

*"We must, we can't just stand back and let them die,"*

*"We've stood back and let everyone else die," Miklos pointed out.*

*"They're our people,"*

*"They're not mine,"*

*"They adopted you into the tribe, you'll betray me if you leave."*

*"That might be so, but in the long run, I'm not a Romany." Miklos told him. "I think it's time for us to leave."*

*The anger faded from Bodie's eyes. "Not us, just you."*

*Miklos couldn't believe his ears. "You're not really going to try and help them are you?"*

*"I must, it's the only way."*

*"You'll be sent to the gas chamber."*

*"Perhaps I will," There was a strange peace in Bodanskya's eyes. "You go, I'm going to try and save my people...good bye Miklos."*

* * *

Bodie was back inside the Raven. He followed Nick to a booth, where two of Radu's people stood close by guarding it. They growled when they saw Nick, Bodie instinctually growled back. The guards let them pass.

Radu was sitting there smoking a cigar and nuzzling two very attractive vampires; one of them a woman, the other a kid that looked only about sixteen. Radu looked up at Bodie, his blue eyes cold.

"Well, look who finally had the courage to show his face in public, my little brother Bodanskya." Radu drawled.

"I'm not your brother," Bodie pointed out.

"How many times have we had this conversation?" Radu took a puff of his cigar. "I think it started when I took your blood and was able to transform myself into a vampire. I might not be your blood brother Bodanskya, but you're the one that made me as I am."

"You forced me to give you my blood, I wouldn't if I'd had the choice," Bodie said firmly.

"My father only called you his son to avoid a scandal! Your father was a guard who screwed the ruling prince's wife! You're nothing but a bastard...and you're no brother of mine!"

Radu jumped to his feet and grabbed Bodie by the collar. Nick got between the two of them and pulled Bodie away across the dance floor.

"Bodie we're on duty!"

"I know that!" Bodie snapped, "But I can fight my own fights."

"I'm well aware of that," Nick told him. "But picking a fight with Radu in a place like this, will only result in you being killed, do you really want that?"

"Of course not,"

"Just watch yourself, Zandor,"

Bodie pulled away from Nick and walked back over to Radu, the vampires that Radu had been nuzzling were gone.

"How's your boyfriend, Bodie" Radu feigned interest. "What's his name? Ray Doyle?"

"My partner is none of your concern, Radu." Bodie tried to keep his temper...but this was Radu, and their hatred went back centuries.

"I call myself Tom now." Radu blew smoke at him. Nick sat down on one side of him, Bodie the other. Nick smiled at Tom, his smile insincere.

"Mind of we sit down?"

"There's been a murder, Radu," Bodie intentionally used the man's real name. "A double murder, and I know you're involved."

Radu feigned innocence. "What's that got to do with me?"

"They where attacked by werewolves," Bodie said.

"I'm not the only werewolf in this world," Radu pointed out. "You're a werewolf, Max is a werewolf, couldn't the two of you have done it?"

"Leaving victims all over the place is your calling card," Bodie told him. "Did you think we wouldn't answer your call?"

"How can I help?"

"You're the self-styled king of the werewolves," Bodie said.

"I *am* the king of the werewolves." Radu corrected.

"We know you or some of your people have killed here, it fits your style." Nick said.

"You've got nothing on me," Radu said. "There is no jail in Canada that can hold me."

"I can call in the enforcers," Bodie threatened.

"You've killed too," Radu countered. "Look at what you did after world war II."

"That was different."

Radu was trying to goad Bodie, it was taking all of Bodie's strength not to attack him.

"Just because our definitions of fun are different, you condemn me."

"So you are the one that has been killing innocents," Nick said.

"I don't admit to anything." Radu took a drag on his cigar. "You should keep an eye on Ray Doyle. I might just get hungry. Then again, he's very good looking for an old guy. I might just bring him over to my side."

With that, Radu disappeared.

* * *

"You don't have to stay with me Vachon, I can take care of myself," Ray Doyle told Vachon for the fourth time. They were in Nick's loft. A place very nicely decorated and full of antiques. Vachon had hovered around him like a butterfly since Max had dropped him off after the autopsy.

"I know I don't have to, but I want to," Vachon countered. Doyle had overheard Max's instructions to Vachon, he had been ordered to baby sit the human. Like Doyle needed baby-sitting, he had been a cop long enough to know how to take care of himself.

"Do you always do as Max orders?" Ray asked.

"I've always found it wise to do as Max tells me," Vachon said with a grin.

Ray went to a shelf and picked up an antique statue that was studded in gems, real gems. "If Nick's only a cop, how can he afford stuff like this?" A smile tugged at Vachon's lips. "Oh, that's something he inherited."

That struck a cord in Ray's memory. He could remember his own father telling him about an inheritance.. but this couldn't be the same thing could it?"

Vachon walked to the kitchenette, got a mug out of the cabinet, opened the refrigerator and poured himself a drink from a wine bottle.

Wine bottles in the refrigerator. Doyle's father had kept blood in wine bottles, but Vachon couldn't be drinking wine could he?

Vachon went back into the sitting room and picking up the remote, sat down on the couch.

"Do you mind if I watch some television?"

"Go ahead."

Vachon turned on the t.v. and started to look for something to watch. The intercom buzzed. Ray, since he was standing up, went over and touched it. On the video screen, there was a pretty blond girl standing there.

"Javier."

"Sorry, I'm not Javier." Ray told her.

The girl smiled. "You're British aren't you?"

"Last time I looked I was,"

"Why don't you stop flirting and buzz her in?" Vachon growled.

"Do you know her?"

"Her name's Urse and she's a friend of mine, don't worry, she's safe."

Ray buzzed her in. The girl came up to the loft. She was wearing very short shorts and holding a pizza and Ray found her very attractive. Vachon glared.

"Don't you think it's a little early for pizza?"

"You said to bring him something to eat!" She protested.

"He's a strict vegetarian,"

"Are you really?" The girl asked.

"Yeah, sorry," Ray smiled his winning smile at her, it used to always work...until he started to look too old.

"You're cute," The girl put the pizza on a coffee table and came over to him. "Are you married?"

"Divorced,"

"How long did your marriage last?"

"Five years, she didn't like sharing me."

The girl had a twinkle in her eye. "So you had a girlfriend,"

"No, a partner, I'm a cop."

"I see, my name's Ursella," She introduced.

"I'm Ray Doyle, my friends call me Ray."

"All right, Ray..." The girl smiled again.

"Urse....." Vachon growled.

*I wasn't going to have him for lunch.* Ray could hear the girl telepath to Vachon. *Max already told me to keep my hands off of him.*

Urse turned and went to the kitchenette. She got a glass from the cupboard, poured herself a glass of the wine, then took a large drink.

*Why can't Nick keep his blood warm?* Urse complained telepathically. *I hate cold blood!*

*Blood...?* Doyle thought. *Could Urse be a vampire? Nick and his friends can't be vampires. The wine's just probably some kind of home brew.*

Urse had left soon after dropping off the pizza and Doyle had to admit it, he was glad. She kept sizing him up, as if she were considering draining him.

It felt odd getting ready for bed in a strange man's bedroom, using his clothes. Nick had assured him that using his loft was alright with him. That for this assignment, it would be easier if Nick stayed close to the station in Max's house. Besides, his loft was just down the street from the free clinic where Max worked.

His second sight was going into hyperdrive. He remembered how his father used to tease him about being telepathic, tonight proved that he had the inheritance. He looked at himself in the mirror, at the strands of gray curls that had long ago overpowered the golden ones, at the deep lines that creased his face.

Long ago he had stopped being handsome. In a month, he would be forty-nine, just one year from mandatory retirement from the CI5 active list. In another year, he would have a desk job. That was another reminder of his getting old.

Bodie. Why did he always think of Bodie when he thought of getting older? Bodie, the man that looked exactly the same as the day they had met, nothing had changed with him. He didn't even have one gray hair, not one wrinkle.

Ray could still remember his father telling him and his twin brother Stephen, that they would never grow old, they had the inheritance inside of them. They would change, the way their father had when they became teenagers. They would become vampires.

Stephen had changed soon after their fourteenth birthday. Ray on the other hand didn't change, and on his sixteenth birthday, he came home to an empty house. His father and brother had deserted him. These killings, they had reminded Ray of his childhood. Of his father's teachings about werewolves.

Something caught Doyle's eye as he stood at the mirror. It was a photograph on the wall beside Nick's bed. He went over, took the photo and sat down on the bed. It was of Bodie, dressed in army fatigues, he was standing with Nick and someone who looked like a very young Cowley.

*They're young, they all look about the same age in this photo. Could it be true? Could Nick and Bodie be vampires?*

Vachon's dog rubbed against Ray's leg. She was a white haired wolf-type german shepard. She had been let in about an hour ago and had taken an instant liking to Ray. Without thinking, he petted her then set the photo down and went into the hallway. From above he saw Vachon, his back to him sitting on the couch, a man sat beside him.

"I don't understand, why does Bodie hate you so much?" Vachon asked the man.

"He has every right to hate me," The other man had an eastern European accent.

"Why?"

"I betrayed him," The stranger said. "We were in France, the Nazi's deported the Gypsies of the village we lived in."

"What has that got to do with you?" Vachon asked. "You're Moldovian."

"Bodie's mother was a Gypsy,"

"Is Max a gypsy?"

"Max and Bodie have different mothers," The man paused. "We were sent to Auschwitz. In the beginning the Nazi's didn't want to see us killed. I wanted to escape from the first, but Bodie wouldn't. He wanted to help his people, so he worked in the infirmary"

"What happened then?"

"A general inspected the camp, it was Radu! He took one look at me and ordered the Gypsy camp to be liquidated, everyone there was gassed, even Bodie," the man explained.

"Didn't he know he wouldn't die?"

"I don't know, we had parted by that time," The man paused. "Before the war, he was a very gifted doctor, he hasn't been able to practice medicine since then."

Doyle went back into Nick's bedroom. Nick was a vampire and so was Vachon, Max and that guy...even *Bodie* was a vampire. Bodie was one of *them*....those that hunted the night. His best friend had never been able to tell him about this.

This made Doyle wonder if Bodie had ever been his friend. He remembered the photo on the bed. He picked it back up. The young man was definitely Cowley. So, their boss knew, too.

Bodie had betrayed him. He had never been able to trust Ray.

* * *

Near daybreak, Nick and Bodie went to Max's house. It was nice and there were signs of children living in it, toys were in a toy box in the corner of the living room, and in the garage, Bodie had to move tricycles and bikes before Nick could park his caddie.

"I thought you said Max was married," Nick asked as he looked around the large living room. The carpeting was white shag, the same color as the walls, the furniture was of cream leather.

One wall had several framed photos, Nick walked over to them and looked.

"He is married," Bodie told him.

"Where's his wife and kids?'

"Nina took the children to America to visit her parents...you did know she was an American?"

"No, I never met her," Nick's eyes didn't move from the display. Bodie went over to Nick. he, too, looked at the photos.

"What is it?" Nick pointed to a photo. It had been taken in the twenties and was of Bodie, Miklos and a woman whose dark hair was in a bob, they looked happy and carefree, as if they didn't have to worry about anything ever.

"What ever happened to Tegan?"

"Haven't you ever asked Max?"

"The only time I did, he almost snapped my head off," Nick said grimly.

"So what happened to her? The last time I saw her was during the war."

"Max and Tegan where working in the resistance against the Nazi's," Bodie explained. "On one mission Tegan got caught and turned over to Radu. He tortured and then beheaded her."

Nick went over to the couch and sat down. "So both you and Max ended a relationship during the war,"

"That was different," Bodie hissed, he hated talking about the war, it brought back too many bad memories. Every time he thought of it, he could see the eyes of the children, the children that he cared for, the children that he had failed...their spirits would never forgive him for his betrayal....

"It wasn't that different,"

"Tegan wouldn't have left Max," Bodie explained "Miklos betrayed me."

"You haven't committed to anyone since then."

"Why should I?" Bodie countered. He sat down beside Nick on the couch.

"What about Doyle, why aren't you with him?"

"I don't want to talk about Doyle," Bodie insisted. "We're just friends."

"Don't give me that," Nick scoffed. "We go back too long for you to try and con me. I can tell by the way that you look at him that you care a great deal. So why aren't the two of you together?"

"Why aren't you with Nat?" Bodie tried to change the subject.

"That's different and you know it, "Nick said firmly. "Is Doyle straight?"

"Doyle's bi, he'll sleep with anything on legs."

"So....."

A long stretch of silence passed between them. Bodie finally decided to give in.

"If you want to know the truth, we did have something going, it lasted almost a year."

"What happened?"

"He helped frame me for murder," Bodie told him. "In the end he was like Miklos, he betrayed me."

"Did he know about you?"

"Yeah, he knew I was a vampire,"

"What do you mean he knew?"

"I hypnotized him into not remembering, it was better that way."

"Why?"

"If he remembered, we couldn't work together as a team."

"Why didn't you get transferred?'

"You know George Cowley, when he gets something in his head, there's no budging it. He's a real bastard that way." Bodie tried to keep his temper, talking about the relationship with Doyle still hurt. "I've been with CI5 for nineteen years, it's time for me to move on,"

"Where will you go?"

"I've got no earthly idea," Bodie admitted.

"Are you going to tell Ray?"

"I think it would be for the best if I just disappeared," Bodie decided to change the subject. "Since Janette left, have you had any sexual outlet?"

"I've been alone since then."

"Why haven't you gotten together with Nat?"

"It's not that simple. I'll kill her if we become involved."

Bodie rolled his eyes, they had this conversation several times over the centuries. "I keep telling you, Nick, you don't have to kill your feed."

"If I don't, they become a vampire"

"They won't if you don't give them any of your blood."

"It doesn't matter anyway," Nick sighed. "You remember LaCroix's promise to me, that he would kill who ever I loved."

Bodie looked at Nick, really looked at him, in all their centuries of friendship, they had never slept together.

*Perhaps there is a way I can make you strong enough to become involved with Nat. If I give you my blood, you'll become an inherited, you would have enough strength to fight LaCroix. I owe it to you my friend. After all this time of you helping me, it's about time that I help you.*

Bodie decided to plunge in feet first and kissed Nick. The cop put his hand behind Bodie's head and pulled him closer, who was surprised by the intensity of Nick's kiss. It seemed to go on forever. Bodie, during the kiss, undressed his friend and before he was even through, he found that Nick was undressing him.

* * *

"I still don't feel like I should be here," Doyle told Max inside the free clinic which was in a converted old house in the bad side of town. "I'm not qualified."

"Put this on," Max handed him a lab coat. "You don't have to be qualified, you're my assistant...you just hand me things when I tell you to."

"I thought we agreed that I was suppose to be in med. school," Doyle's main suspects to the killing were the vampires that surrounded him, especially Max, who he now realized what this man was.

His father had introduced Doyle to Max soon after his twin had been brought across, he could still remember having to call Max 'your highness'. This man's hair might be longer, but this was the same man that he had met as a child. Max was Vlad Dracula.

"I've told my staff you're in med. school," Max looked into Doyle's eyes. "Put on the jacket, Ray."

Doyle found himself putting on the jacket. "Go see if anyone is in the waiting room."

When Ray went into the narrow dark hallway, he realized that Max had hypnotized him!

*I'm going to have to keep my guard up, I can't have every vampire in this place hypnotizing me. There's no way I'll find the killer if I'm under someone else's control. My father taught me ways not to be hypnotized, I'll have to use them.*

Doyle found Vachon sitting in a chair in the hallway, leaning against the wall as if he was having a hard time trying to keep awake. He was wearing black leather and was in desperate need of a shave.

"Hi, Ray,"

"Your going to stick out like a sore thumb."

"I'm here to help you find the killer, and protect you."

"I've told you before, I don't need protection," Doyle could feel his gun that he wore in a shoulder holster, armed with special bullets, bullets his father had taught him to make. They where made from a silver casing with a wooden and garlic core. If any vampire tried anything with him, they would be sorry. "I can take care of myself."

"Guns aren't the answer to everything Ray."

"Sod off," Doyle said gruffly.

"I'm not leaving until Max tells me to."

"You and your orders." Doyle went into the waiting room, it had once been the old house's living room, all the windows where shuttered and the entire room was illuminated by bulbs. Doyle was going to ask why the window was closed, then realized the reason. He had worked in the bad side of London, it wasn't safe to keep the windows open, a passing sniper might kill someone. He looked around the room, it was filled with innocent poor people, none that deserved to die simply because they where in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The receptionist was Vachon's friend Urse, she looked up to him and smiled. "Hello cutie"

Doyle smiled back. "Hello,"

"I just love British men," She cooed. "Would you like to go out for a bite at lunch?"

"Sure why not?" He shrugged.

He had a feeling that Max had asked Urse to be there too, the look she gave him made him think she wanted to drain him.

*Can she be a vampire too?*

He was tired, that was it, it was making him paranoid, not everyone in Toronto was a vampire, they couldn't be. He hadn't gotten enough sleep the night before, but he couldn't sleep, not after what he found out. That the people he was working closest with were vampires.

*This is going to be a very long day.*

*  *  *

It was the middle of the day and Nick was lying in bed with Bodie. The dark haired man was curled up beside him, his head on the cop's shoulder. Every once in awhile, he would hear Bodie would moan 'Ray' in his sleep.

*You're such a romantic, are you ever going to get over Ray?*

It had been a week since their affair had begun, they spent what seemed like endless mornings sharing each others blood, using each other for an outlet, pretending that the other was a lover that they couldn't have.

During this time, Nick felt more strong then he had ever been; but he was realistic about this, he knew his strength came from being sexually satisfied for once. And he had never shared blood with an inherited before and wondered if his strength came from Bodie's blood.

The phone rang and since it wasn't his house, he let the answering machine get it. It was obviously Max on the phone, saying something in a language that Nick didn't understand. So the message was for Bodie. Nick shook Bodie by the shoulder, he opened his eyes a slit.

"What's wrong?"

"Max just left a message on the machine."

"Hooray for him," Bodie turned over and closed his eyes.

"Bodie, the message is in Romany, which I don't understand, you'll have to translate for me."

"Why didn't my bloody brother put the machine beside the bed like normal people?" Bodie groaned, sitting up and getting out of bed. He walked nude to the answering machine that was lying on a table beside the window.

Nick spent the time enjoying the view. Bodie played the message again, his face turning more and more grim as he listened. When the message was through, he turned to Nick.

"There have been seventeen bodies found this morning, all killed by werewolves."

"What does Max want us to do about it?"

"He wants us to get to the morgue as soon as possible."

Nick looked at the clock, it was only two in the afternoon. "I can't go, it's still daylight outside."

"Max has ordered us to come."

Nick tried to fight the panic that he was feeling. "Doesn't the bastard know that I'll die?"

"You know the rules," Bodie said simply. "He's our king, we must do as he commands."

Nick got out of bed and checked Max's closet, there was nothing that could completely cover him in it. "I'm going to have to ride in the trunk."

"Tell you what," Bodie got a shrewd look on his face. "I'm going to take you outside and if you start smoking, you can stay here."

"Max commanded us," Nick reminded Bodie.

"I'll take the responsibility for it," Bodie went up behind Nick and put his arms around his waist, squeezing him tightly and nuzzling his neck. "He's more likely to forgive me then you."

Nick didn't believe Bodie. "If you say so."

"Tell you what, let's take a shower before we go."

"Just a shower?" Nick asked, he could feel Bodie's hard on pressed against his hips. "We don't have time."

"Max's given us an hour to get to his office."

"A shower it is then," Nick turned in Bodie's arms and kissed him

* * *

After the shower, they dressed. Sex with Bodie was good, their sleeping together had made their friendship stronger and he made no demands on Nick for a commitment... asked for none in return.

*I don't think I could ever give you a commitment, you're in love with Ray and I'm in love with Nat.*

"Are you ready?" Bodie asked as they went into the garage and got into Nick's car.

"As ready as I'll ever be." Nick had borrowed one of Bodie's turtle neck shirts and pulled his black leather jacket up to his ears, putting on sunglasses as he touched the automatic door control. Nick watched the garage door rise and drove his car outside of the garage, parking it. He then waited for the smoke that would start when his body began to combust. He wanted to run inside, but Bodie's hand on his shoulder kept him from going anywhere.

For the first time since Nat's attempt at curing Nick, the sun didn't hurt his eyes. It didn't feel like iron-hot fireplace pokers against his skin, instead all he could feel was the coolness of the October morning. The panic was still there, though because he knew what would happen. But then what he had expected didn't happen. He *wasn't* burning.

"How do you feel?" Bodie had a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

"What the hell is going on?" Nick demanded. "How can I go out in the sun?"

"It's simple really," Bodie caressed Nick's shoulder. "You're an inherited now."

"LaCroix brought me over, I'm a secondary," Nick reminded him.

"If you must know, you're both now."

"I didn't think that could be."

"We've exchanged enough blood for me to have brought over a dozen new inheriteds."

Nick now knew why Bodie was smiling, he knew Nick could go out in the sun. "You did this on purpose,"

"Of course I did,"

"Why did you do that?" Nick was a bit angry, Bodie could have at least asked first.

"I owed it to you, Nick,"

"You don't owe me anything,"

"How many times have you helped me in our century of friendship?" Bodie asked. "Too many times for either of us to count, it was about time I paid you back for what I owed."

"Does that mean that I can do anything an inherited can?" The truth was finally sinking in on Nick.

"Include having children?"

"You can have a dozen, if you want."

Children... Nick had always wanted children, and the powers of an inherited...

"Inheriteds don't have masters, does that mean...." Nick asked.

"LaCroix's going to be really pissed with you when he gets back," Bodie smiled.

"I can handle LaCroix," Nick said without thinking, and it was true, for the first time, he felt as if he would be able to handle his master. "How am I ever going to thank you for this gift?"

"You don't have to," Bodie smiled. "I told you, I owe you,"

***Holland-Christmas 1944***

*It was Christmas, Nick was one of the few people in the resistance unit to be on duty. The Christians of the group had gone to visit their families and Nick didn't mind being on duty, being a vampire, he didn't celebrate Christmas. The only other members of the group that hadn't gone home, were the few Jews and Romanys that had slipped through the roundup by the Nazi's.*

*Nick had first been assigned to work with the French resistance because he was a British agent at the time. After France's liberation, he had been ordered to go to the part of Holland that had yet to be freed and help there.*

*Nazi Holland was being punished by the Nazi's because part of the country had been liberated. Food was now non-existent, trains that should be used for shipping food, were instead used to transport Jews and other groups to the death camps.*

*The door to the cellar that served as the resistance's headquarters opened and something was shoved in. It was followed by two armed resistance members, one was male, the other fe-*

*male, both belonging to races that the Nazi's wanted to arrest, the man was a Jew, the woman a Romany.*

*"We found this wandering around," Willow said.*

*"Why did you have to bring him here?"*

*He looks on the run from the Nazi's," Ezra replied. The prisoner looked up to Nick and the first thing Nick noticed was his sapphire blue eyes that where so dark, they where almost black. He was very thin, haggard and had a beard. The man's eyes, though, they looked so familiar to Nick, that and the pale skin and dark hair made Nick realize who this was.*

*"Bodanskya?" He finally asked.*

*The man nodded slightly.*

*"Bodanskya, that's a Russian name, could he be a POW?" Ezra asked.*

*"He's a Romanian gypsy, "Nick knelt down beside him and, in Hungarian, said.. "I was told that you where killed."*

*"It isn't very easy to kill me," Bodie replied in Dutch.*

*"You look like death warmed over," Nick told him.*

*"Do you know how hard it is to escape from Auschwitz?"*

*"Auschwitz?" Ezra asked. "My sister was sent there, did you see her?"*

*"There is nothing, but death at Auschwitz," Willow said.*

*"My sister was a doctor, they wouldn't have killed her," There was a note of desperation in the man's voice.*

*"A doctor.... I knew a Dutch doctor...." Bodie said. "Her name was Inger...."*

*"My sister is called Inger, Inger Erikssonn."*

*"She works in the camps infirmary."*

*"You're not lying to me?" The man fingered the trigger of his gun.*

*Suddenly there was fire in Bodanskya's eyes. "I am not lying to you."*

*Nick looked his staff over. "The two of you better get back on duty." Willow and Ezra left.*

*"Did his sister really live?" Nick asked Bodie in Hungarian.*

*"Yes, she works at the twin study."*

*"The twin study?" Nick asked confused.*

*"The Nazi's are studying twins because they think there might be a way of making all good German women have twins," He sagged against Nick exhausted.*

*"When was the last time you fed?"*

*"Two. no three weeks ago."*

*"Why on earth have you gone for so long without food?"*

*"I've been on the run."*

*"From the death camp?"*

*"The Romany's have been liquidated. there's nothing left for me there," Nick helped Bodie to a chair. he then went to a small ice box and took a bottle out. handing it to his friend. "So why haven't you gone back home?"*

*"I did."*

*"It was liberated. so what are you doing here?"*

*"The few Romany's that survived the occupation heard that the Gypsy camp had been liquidated and all had been killed." Bodie explained. "My people thought I was a ghost. an evil spirit."*

*"Didn't you tell them that you had escaped?"*

*"What's the use?" Bodie sat dejected. the drink in his hand. Nick realized that his friend didn't have the strength to open the bottle and took it from Bodie to open. "Did you escape before the liquidation?"*

*Bodie took a long pull on his drink. "No. I stayed. I tried to help my people."*

*"Zorya and her children....." Nick said referring to Bodie's daughter and grandchildren.*

*"I was able to get them out. but they want nothing to do with me."*

*"Why would Zorya do something like that?"*

*"I wasn't able to save the rest of our people." Bodie told him. "She is right. I am damned."*

*"If you stayed during the liquidation....."*

*"Yes. I went through the gas chamber." Bodie's eyes where hard. "I hoped that perhaps I would die with them. I wanted to die. I deserved to die."*

*"Why?"*

*"I couldn't save my people."*

*"How did you get away?' Nick asked. if Bodie went so far as to go to through the gas chamber...*

*"I'm not quite sure." Bodanskya admitted. "When I woke. I was in Palestine. the woman who took care of me. said that the archangel Miklos brought me to her."*

*"Miklos...."*

*"For some reason, that bastard brought me to her." Bodie spat.*

*"Where is Miklos?"*

*"I don't know, and I don't care," Bodie took another long drink from the bottle. "Can we talk about something else?"*

*"What am I going to do with you, Zandor?"*

*"I'm a good soldier. I can help you with the resistance."*

*Nick looked Bodie over, the guy looked like he could fall over dead from starvation, and he wanted to help!*

*Almost as if Bodie could read his mind, he said. "I know I look terrible, but after a couple of feedings and a bath, I'll be as good as new."*

* * *

Ray Doyle was tired and drifted off to sleep at Nick's loft...

***Several years ago....***

*Doyle was lying in bed with Bodie, his Bodie. He felt as if he belonged here and Bodie was kissing him, running his lips up and down his neck...driving him mad. Ray didn't just want to kiss.*

*"Are you ever going to screw me?" He asked impatiently.*

*"I'm getting to it, I'm getting to it," Bodie told Ray's neck, "Hold your dick."*

*Ray couldn't wait, he decided to take matters into his own hands and rolled onto his back, pulling his lover top of him. He wanted for Bodie to take him, for it wasn't quite as intense when he took the vampire.*

*"Your insatiable," Bodie teased.*

*"You made me that way."*

*"Perhaps I did," Bodie eased himself between Doyle's legs, his cock already hard, throbbing and he slowly entered him. He looked down to Ray, his eyes glowing with blood lust, his fangs extended, this had once frightened the younger man, but no longer, instead he put his hand on the back of the dark head and guided him to his neck.*

*The scene shifted, to the rowhouse that Cowley had finally agreed to let Bodie and Doyle live at. It had been hard persuading Cowley into letting the lovers live together, for their superior was of the old school that didn't think it proper. He would have hit the roof if he found out that they had gotten married. Or that on the next full moon, Bodie was planning on giving Doyle his blood. Making them a couple forever.*

*Ray had been with Bodie a year, but had been forbidden to live together, until now. The boxes containing their things where still scattered about the place, just by looking at it, he could tell*

*that some of the boxes where gone. Doyle knew his lover was there, he had seen his car. But he wasn't in the sitting room.*

*Suddenly Bodie appeared on the second floor, he came down ground carrying a box. He froze when he saw Doyle.*

*"What are you doing?" Doyle asked him.*

*"What does it look like I'm doing?" Bodie spat. It suddenly dawned on Doyle what had happened.*

*"You're moving out?"*

*"Right the first time," there was hatred in Bodie's voice.*

*"Why?"*

*"You know why."*

*Ray knew it had to do with the recent Marika case. She had been an old lover of Bodie's him and now she was an East German movie star and had spent an afternoon with Bodie in a hotel room. During that time, an East German politician, who was across the street from the hotel, had been shot and Bodie had been framed for the murder. In the end, Marika had been killed by her own husband...and Bodie blamed Doyle.*

*Bodie left the house. He came back a few moments later and was going to walk past Doyle as if he wasn't there, but instead, his lover blocked his way. The vampire grabbed Doyle by the shoulders and moved him out of the way, then started climbing the stars back to the bedroom.*

*"You can't leave without telling me why," Ray said quickly. "We've have too much together for me not to get some kind of explanation. I love you..."*

*That made Bodie pause, he turned back to him and there was pain in his sapphire eyes. "If you loved me, you wouldn't have framed me for murder."*

*"I didn't."*

*"Then why did you follow me? Why did you hide Marika after my arrest?"*

*"It didn't happen that way."*

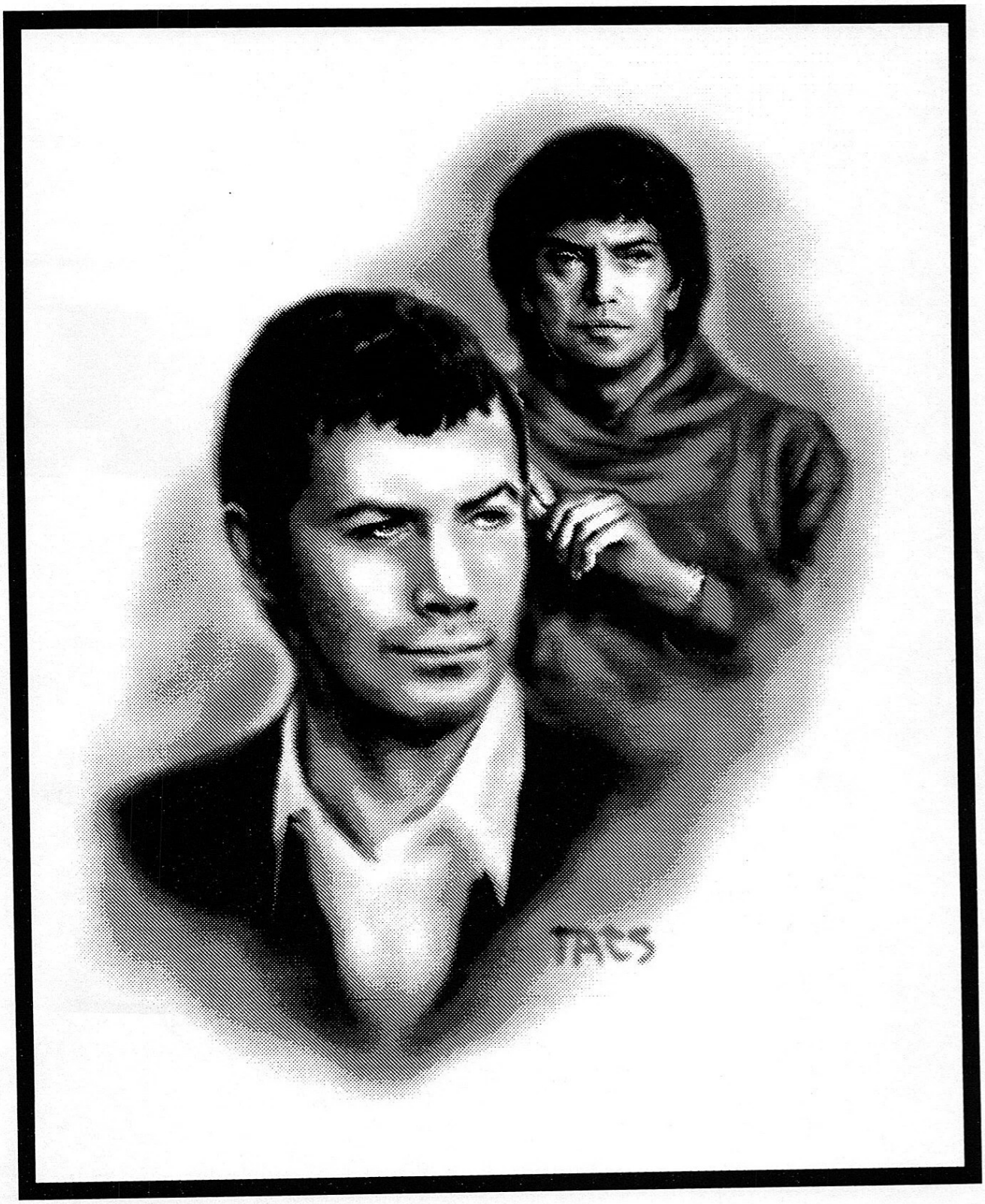
*"You can't deny that you followed me."*

*"I wasn't working with MI5!" The younger man insisted. "I was following Cowley's orders!"*

*"Just following orders!" Bodie sneered, he walked down the steps and towards Ray. "Do you know how many of my people died just because the Nazi's where following orders?"*

*"Please Bodie, listen to reason."*

*"I'm not going to stay with someone who turned me in just because a superior told him to," Bodie grabbed his lover by the shoulders and looked into Doyle's eyes. " but I want you to know that I will always love you."*


TAGS

Max handed the cards to Doyle, "Shuffle them for me.

Doyle stared at the cards in his hands, they gave off an almost elec... sure I should do that, these cards are unique, they're not even yours."

Max's dark eyes narrowed. "How do you know that?"

Doyle put the cards on the table. He had revealed something that he usually kept hidden...that he was psychic, "I don't think you would believe me if I told you."

Max pick the cards back up and shoved them in Doyle's hand. "Give me your first impression of who these cards belong to, and don't think I'll laugh, just tell me."

Doyle ran his fingers over the cards and could see a picture, a picture that couldn't be true. Bodie was painting the cards, he had long hair and wore medieval clothing.

Doyle looked up to Max. "I think it's about time that you tell me what the hell is going on?"

"What do you mean?" Max said innocently, a little too innocently.

"I heard Vachon and Miklos talking earlier, about Bodie. They talked about World War II and how Bodie's people had died. Miklos said that Bodie even went to the gas chamber with his people. I want to know just how old is Bodie?"

"How old do you think he is?" Max countered.

This man was driving Doyle mad. He got to his feet and put the cards on the table then walked over to the window and stared out into the night sky. The memories of his childhood began to block out everything, but he knew in the end that he had to face this. "I know there is something going on, people don't usually live forever, unless they're vampires...is Bodie a *vampire*?"

"Vampire's are imaginary things," Max said silkily.

"Yeah right," Doyle snorted. "That's why Vachon and Urse shared a bottle of blood. That's why my father deserted me when my twin brother turned and I didn't."

"Your father was a vampire?" Suddenly Max was at Doyle's side. "Was your mother human? Did she ever cross over?"

Doyle didn't look at Max. "She never crossed over, didn't want to."

"Where's your mother now?"

"She died when I was six, a man called LaCroix drained her."

"Look at me Ray!" When Doyle didn't, Max's voice changed, "*Look* at me Ray!"

Doyle found himself turning to the man. "Your father shouldn't have left you, if he was an inherited, he would know you would turn once you died,"

"If I am a vampire, why would I have to wait?"

*...as beginning to think his lover had changed ...ooked into his eyes.*

*...ever shared a love."*

...He was alone in bed, his body covered with sweat. He felt as ...he should be here and an empty feeling filled his soul...the feeling ...case. Something was missing in his life and he was no longer whole, ..., because his lover wasn't here.

...d, He thought. *I was never involved with Bodie. It was only a dream.*

th... ...e dreams came more and more to Ray now, almost nightly. Everytime he had one of ...e felt as if he had something taken from him, something that he would never get back. And ...was afraid that if he went back to sleep, the dream would come again.

* * *

"No that can't be right," Doyle heard Max Shreck say. Leaving Nick's bedroom, he looked down onto the living room and saw Max sitting on the couch, playing cards.

Doyle checked his gun, which he had put on beneath his robe and went downstairs. Max had several cards laid out on the coffee table and held a pack in his left hand. Doyle had worked with Max for a week and this was the first time he saw him work with cards.

Without looking up, Max told him. "Sit beside me Ray."

Doyle really didn't want to, but he knew that this way, he could find out what was going on. So he did. Max was dressed simply in a pair of dark black jeans, a white silk shirt and his long dark hair was free, spilling down his back. For the first time Ray could see that the man held tarot cards, but they didn't look like any that he had ever seen before. They were very different, some of the people looked almost familiar, he could almost swear that Bodie looked out to him from the Magician.

"What do you think of the cards?" Max asked.

"They're very beautiful."

"They where made by a prince in his exile," Max explained. "It took him twenty years to finish them...four hundred and fifty years ago."

"You mean they're real?" Doyle gasped.

"Of course they're real."

"I don't recognize the language."

"It's Romany, the language of the gypsies," Max picked the cards off the table and shuffled them. "How much do you know about Bodie's past?"

"Not alot."

"It's what happens to children of mixed unions." the vampire explained. ""Twins are always born, one turns when he is a teen, the other, when they die,"

Ray wasn't sure he could believe Max so he took out his gun, and pushed it into Max's stomach. "I know who you are, Max, who you really are."

"What do you mean?"

"I was introduced to you, right after Stephen turned. I had to bow to you and call you *your highness*, you're Vlad, the impaler!"

"That's one of the name's I've gone by over the years."

"After my father deserted me, I researched into your history and found out what kind of monster you were!" The gun didn't waver from Doyle's hand. "You murdered entire villages simply because they didn't agree with you!"

"It didn't happen that way."

"You forget, you had witnesses," Doyle snapped. "Did Bodie help you?"

"What do you know about Bodie?"

Doyle cocked the gun, but Max didn't even blink.

"You know bullets won't work on me."

"That's what you think! My father taught me well, he showed me how to make a bullet that could kill a vampire, they have a garlic and wood core."

That made Max blink, he looked into Doyle's eyes. "Give me the gun."

Ray steeled himself against the vampire. "No!"

"I said give me the gun,"

He tried to resist, he struggled against Max's will, but the vampire was too powerful. He found himself uncocking the gun and handing it butt first to Max, who laid it on the fireplace mantle. He then went back to Doyle. "Tell me Ray, what do you know about Bodie? Do you know he's a vampire?"

"In my dreams he is," he found himself saying.

"What happened in the dreams?"

"They are always different, it takes place during a time where we where lovers."

"Then what happened?"

"The end of the dream is always the same, he would look into my eyes and make me forget, forget we were ever lovers. I didn't want to forget, I loved him, but he made me."

"In real life, did you love Bodie?"

"Forget, must forget," Doyle found himself saying.

Max moved closer to Ray, but all he could see was his dark eyes. "I am your king, I order you to remember."

"I will remember," he echoed and something in Ray snapped. He could remember, remember the nights spent with Bodie and that he had never loved anyone that way before. The pain of what happened flooded through him. "Please Your Highness, let me forget."

"For you to grow, you must remember."

The pain that was brought with the memories blocked out everything. Bodie had rejected him, he slid to the ground, tears pouring down his face, the dreams had been real, once he had shared a love that he could never have again. Finally he gasped. "I didn't betray Bodie!"

"I know," Max knelt down beside Doyle. "Look at me," He commanded, and Doyle did. "When you look at me, Ray, you'll see Bodie."

"I'll see Bodie....."

Suddenly Max was gone and Bodie was in his place, kneeling beside him, his sapphire eyes curious.

"What happened to Max?" Doyle asked.

"He had to leave," Bodie reached out and wiped the tears from Doyle's cheek. It was such a loving gesture that it made him feel like crying more, a gesture that he use to use when they were.... "Why did you make me forget our love?"

"I thought you betrayed me, I was wrong."

"I could never betray you," He confessed. "Why did you make me forget?"

"I thought it would be better that way."

"I always felt as if a hole were inside me, that I wasn't complete and I wasn't. I didn't have you."

"All that's gone," Bodie stroked Doyle's battered cheek bone. "I still love you."

"I love you, too."

Bodie kissed him, it was a passionate kiss, from one that had been in a desert too long. Bodie picked Doyle up in his strong arms and carried him to Nick's bedroom. He then set him down on the bed as if he was made of fine china. Bodie then stood and stripped off his clothes. Doyle watched and saw the hunger in his eyes. He found himself taking off his own clothes. Then Bodie kissed him yet again. Doyle wanted to pull Bodie on top of him, instead the vampire sat on the end of the bed, his cock huge and pulsing. He pulled Ray on his lap, pushing him onto himself. Ray opened himself to his lover and slowly began to move up and down. Bodie nuzzled Ray's neck as they made love and as the passion grew, the vampire bit down, drinking from the mortal. When Bodie had his fill, he pulled away from Doyle and kissed his lips, then made a large cut across his jugular and pushed Doyle's head to it.

"Drink my love."

Ray, still impaled on his lover, touched his lips to the cut and the salty, metallic blood entered his mouth, unconsciously he swallowed. After the first drink it wasn't so difficult. He felt Bodie's arms go around him, comforting him.

* * *

Doyle's eyes flickered open, he was lying in bed again. This time Bodie was here, curled around him protectively. He could now remember their relationship and how much he had loved him. He now knew that Bodie was a vampire, not only knew, but understood.

Ray knew why he felt so empty all those years, why he felt as if a part of him where missing. Why when he was married, he felt as if he where cheating on Bodie, and in a way he was. He realized he shouldn't worry about the past, not when the present was beckoning to him, a new chance for them to be together.

Bodie groaned and moved closer to him and when he did, a lock of long hair fell onto Doyle.

*Long hair?....Bodie didn't have long hair.*

Suddenly the scene shifted and the man beside Doyle was slimmer then the muscular man, without even looking, Doyle knew that this must be Max. Max, why was he in bed with Max? Why did he remember being with Bodie last night? His head began to spin and there was a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. Hunger, he was starving, but not for food, something else, something that he couldn't describe.

Before he could say anything, Vachon came into the room, "Max!"

There was a thud and Vachon fell to the ground, a crossbow arrow in his thigh. Radu stood over him, he was grinning. He aimed the crossbow at Ray and hit him in the shoulder. Ray felt the arrow burn his flesh. Then Radu reloaded and shot Max twice.

There was a inhuman cry and Urse came running into the room, she turned into a white dog which tackled Radu and they began to wrestle on the floor. Vachon staggered to his feet, he checked Max, who shook his head. "I can handle Radu, get Ray to safety,"

"Yes, Your Highness," Vachon said. He looked at the open window, then at Ray. "We have to get out of here."

"How?" Ray asked.

"Just don't let go of me," Vachon took Doyle into his arms, and with a grunt, lifted him up, carrying him to the window and suddenly they where in the air. Doyle didn't have to remember what Vachon had told him, he just held on for dear life.

Vachon sat down in an alley way, he placed the nude Doyle beside a trash bin and asked, "How are you feeling?"

Doyle looked him over, the man was in obvious pain. "I was about to ask you the same thing,"

"I'm all right," Vachon replied.

Doyle could tell he was lying. "Bullshit, you were hurt, too."

"So I was hurt, too," Vachon shrugged. "I'm older than you, it doesn't hurt as much." But as Vachon said it, he grimaced in pain. "I'm going to ask Miklos for help."

"You mean Bodie's friend...." Doyle could feel something, a presence, he wasn't sure what, then he realized, it was more then one something, most of them where malevolent. "I can feel something!"

"What do you feel?"

"There's great evil around."

"You're feeling the presence of vampires."

"Are all vampires evil?"

"Are all humans?" Vachon countered. "If you want to know the truth, this is the Raven, Radu's headquarters."

"Who's Radu?"

"The guy who shot you."

Fear almost overcame Doyle. "We can't hide here!"

"Radu won't look for us here, now would he?" Vachon asked. "Miklos is Bodie's friend, he will help us."

With a groan, Vachon stood up and staggered across the alleyway, knocking on the back door of the building. Several seconds passed and Miklos appeared. He looked Vachon over with his gray eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"We where attacked by Radu, we need help," Vachon said simply.

"It's too dangerous to keep you here."

"It will be worth your while," The dark haired man tempted. "Max is dead, Bodie's the new king, this fight is now between Radu and Bodie."

"What's that got to do with me?" Miklos asked.

"The two of you where together for centuries, I know the two of you have had your disagreements, but do you really hate Bodie enough to reject his lover?"

The man looked at Vachon and said, "Bring him."

Miklos lead them to his private apartment where he went to the far wall and opened it. Behind the sliding wall was a small room with a cot and a refrigerator. He then looked the wounded men over. "What ever you do, don't leave this room!"

"We won't," Vachon told him.

"I have to get back to the bar or I'll be missed." With that, Miklos left.

Vachon carried Doyle into the small room and he set him down on the bed. He then shut the door and turning to Doyle, touched his forehead. "You're running a fever."

"Oh," Doyle was having a difficult time talking, his teeth began to feel strange and his canines extended.

"I must get your arrow out," Vachon told him.

"Your not a doctor," His teeth cut his lip.

Vachon reached out and touched the blood that ran down Ray's chin, then he touched his finger to his mouth. "I was one, once."

"Before or after the dark ages?"

"I was a doctor during the age that people fought with arrows!" Vachon looked into Ray's eyes, "The wood's getting into your system, if I don't remove the arrow, you'll die."

"I'm going to die anyway."

"You don't know that, we're defeated right now, but we're still in the war," Vachon looked deeper into Ray's eyes. "I must remove the arrow, trust me, you must trust me!"

Doyle felt himself go under, felt himself say. "I trust you Vachon..."

"Call me Javier, we are friends."

"Javier....."

Vachon took a knife out of his boot and used it to dig out the arrow, then took a bottle of blood out of the refrigerator and poured some on the wound. Doyle passed out from the pain.

When he awoke, the place was illuminated in a twilight like glow and Vachon was sitting against the wall, his hurt leg stretched out in front of him with the arrow still embedded. Vachon pulled the arrow out of the wound. He sat there for several moments, trying to catch his breath, then looked up to Doyle, into his eyes.

"Sleep, you must sleep."

And he found himself going under once more.

* * *

Time passed, Vachon guessed ten or twelve hours. He could sense that the sun had risen and then set. His leg had finally stopped hurting, but now he was more concerned with Doyle. The red head hadn't stirred since Vachon had ordered him to sleep.

Doyle had been panting for a while, as if he had trouble getting his breath, he was going through the change, it was always more traumatic for the inherited.

*Damn you inheriteds, why does it always take two feedings to get you across?*

A growl emitted from Doyle's lips.

*What the hell?*

Vachon got to his knees and took a good look at Ray, he was still nude. The only clothes Vachon had on him where the ones he was wearing and he didn't like stealing from Miklos.

Doyle was going through the change all right, he already looked to be in his early twenties, the years had melted off of him like butter. Gone too where the gray streaks from his hair, he now had reddish golden curls.

*Damn he's fine! No wonder Bodie's so crazy about him.*

Javier could tell that the new vampire was sick, writhing on the cot, his cock so hard that Vachon could see it though the covers. Ray's eyes were just two glowing slits and sweat poured down his face as he growled when Vachon touched his forehead. He was burning up.

*Blood fever!*

Blood fever, the fever that the inherited got when a second feeding was postponed, the hunger that even human blood couldn't satisfy.

*It's going to have to be me that finishes bringing you across. If I don't give it to you willingly, you'll take it from me and I'll be in danger if I don't submit. This way, I might be able to control you.*

Vachon pulled off his clothes. He usually didn't have sex with men and he had never had one that was going through blood fever. He knew it would be rough, far rougher then he liked.

Javier knelt down and kissed Doyle deeply. Ray grabbed him with an iron grip and pulled him into bed with him. He pushed the older vampire onto his stomach, and without preparation, entered him roughly.

* * *

Doyle woke from a very strange dream, a dream that he had raped Vachon. The room was illuminated in a twilight-like haze, but he could see no sign of a light source. Vachon was standing beside the cot, dressing. For some strange reason, Doyle felt a connection with Vachon and he realized that he had no idea who much time had passed, the last thing he could remember was Vachon removing the arrow from his shoulder.

Vachon looked down at him and smiled. "How are you feeling?"

"A lot better," Doyle admitted. He looked down to Vachon's leg which had completely healed. "I thought you where shot."

" I took out the arrow," Javier shrugged. He picked his shirt off the floor, put it on and began to button it. The vampire had seemed a bit distant to Doyle before, but now the new vampire felt as if he where linked to the older man.

*What the hell is going on?* he thought.

Vachon looked down to him, his dark eyes sparkling. "I'm getting dressed."

For the first time since he woke, he realized that he was nude and gathered the covers around him. He suddenly felt very vulnerable. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

"You sent it to me telepathically."

"I see," he said, even though he didn't see at all. He masked his thoughts the way his father had taught him to do when he was a child. "I had a very strange dream,"

"What about?"

"I dreamt that we slept together."

"What do you mean?"

Vachon played innocent, so innocent that Doyle could see right through it...he didn't know *how* he could, he just could. "I dreamt that I raped you."

"I wouldn't call it rape," A smile tugged at Vachon's lips.

"Then it really happened?" Doyle gasped.

Vachon sat down on the edge of the cot. "Yes, it really happened, we were together." He reached out and began playing with Doyle's curls. "Don't blame yourself, you where going through blood fever."

"Blood fever....."

"Max was the one that brought you across, but he only gave you your first feeding, you needed two to complete the crossover."

"I am *not* a vampire!" He pulled away from Vachon.

"You are now my friend," Javier picked a hand mirror off the refrigerator and held it up so that Doyle could see. The man that looked back to Doyle was a younger version of himself. His hair was now reddish gold and gone were the lines that crossed his face, his emerald eyes were now a deeper green.

"I've gone through the change..."

"If I hadn't given you your second feeding, you would have died."

"Does that mean that you're now my master?"

"In a way yes," Vachon put the mirror down. "In a way, no."

"What do you mean?"

"You're a big boy, Ray, you can take care of yourself." He reached out and stroked Doyle's curls, and this time he let him. "Besides, if anything happens, you have Bodie to help you, you don't need me."

There was something that really bothered Doyle. "If I was going through the blood fever, why didn't you let me die?"

"Do you really want to die?" He asked gently.

"I never thought I was going to become a vampire since I didn't go through the change as a teenager."

Vachon started stroking Doyle's cheek, "All that's gone now, you're a vampire...you'll live forever."

"What's Bodie going to do once he finds I've come across?"

"Have you thought he might be happy?"

Something else bothered Doyle. "Will I go though this blood fever thing again?"

"No, you're brought across now."

"Where you hurt badly?"

"If you want to know the truth, it hurt at first," His finger traced Doyle's battered cheekbone. "Once you bit me, I really didn't care anymore, it was very erotic. I liked it really and if you want to do it again, I wouldn't mind."

There was a noise and suddenly Miklos entered the room. The older man looked them over. Doyle could tell he wasn't too happy. "I thought you should know...the enforcers are here."

"We have to get out of here," Vachon said quickly.

"They have the Raven surrounded, you're stuck here."

* * *

Nick couldn't help but notice that no one was standing guard outside his warehouse and he wasn't sure if he could sense vampire or not. "Something's wrong, I can feel it."

"I can, too," Bodie agreed. "One of us should go in and see what's wrong."

"Perhaps we both should," Nick said.

They went into the warehouse and took the lift to his apartment. There was no one downstairs, so they went to the second floor bedroom.

The first thing Nick saw was Max, an arrow sticking out from his back. He was lying beside Urse on the floor, his long dark hair was like a blanket across her chest. Nick snarled and pulled the older vampire off of Urse. As he grabbed Max, he saw his face. There was a large claw mark across it, going from the left side of the forehead down to his right side of his neck. It had literally split his face open and Nick could see the bone from his cheek and nose through the wound.

"I tried to get the arrow out of Urse, but I must have passed out," Max groaned.

"We better get you to the bed," Nick said. He picked up Max and carried him over, gently laying him down.

Bodie leaned over and examined Urse...there was a wooden steak embedded in her heart and she had been beheaded. He pulled the steak out and looked at it. "This belonged to an in-forcer."

"Were the enforcers here?" Nick asked Max and when the man nodded, Nick asked. "Did you call them in?"

"No, we could handle this," Max gasped.

"He needs blood," Bodie said changing the subject. "Where do you keep yours?"

"Downstairs, in the refrigerator," Nick said. Without saying anything, Bodie left.

"I need to get the arrow out," Nick told Max.

"I didn't do this,"

Nick looked down to the king of the vampires. It was quite obvious that he was just as much a victim as Urse. If he *had* called in the enforcers, they would have taken him to be healed.

"I know you had nothing to do with this. Please, Your Majesty, I need to take this arrow out now."

"Do it then," Max turned so that his back was to Nick.

He grabbed the arrow lodged in Max's shoulder and with one hard pull, took it out.

Max's cry reverberated around the loft and suddenly Bodie was there, carrying three wine bottles.

"What happened?"

"I took the arrow out," Nick said.

Max looked up to Bodie. "I'm sorry, my brother, I was acting like a child."

Nick held out his hand and Bodie handed him a bottle. He opened it with his teeth and poured some of the blood over Max's wounds, the rest he brought to the vampire king's lips. Nick had to help with the second bottle, too, but by the third, he was strong enough to hold it on his own. Then, without saying anything, Bodie pushed by Nick and he brought his wrist to his mouth, cutting it open with his canines and offering the wrist to Max who took it and drank.

Nick knew that Max would need vampire blood to heal wounds as severe as his, but he didn't expect Bodie to offer it without even being asked. It was something almost sensual between the two brothers, but pure at the same time; Bodie giving himself completely to his brother. Loyalty, the kind of loyalty Nick had never gotten from LaCroix, who would have made him beg for the same honor.

But he was now free of LaCroix and there would never be a time again that Nick had to do something against his will for his master. He was free, for the first time in over seven hundred years, he was free.

Finally, when Max was done feeding, Bodie asked. "Did the enforcers take Vachon and Doyle?"

"No, they didn't," Already Max's voice sounded stronger. "I ordered Vachon to take Doyle somewhere to hide."

"Where would they go?" Bodie looked at Nick. "You know how his mind works, where could he have taken him?"

Nick thought for a moment, "He would take him to the Raven."

"Why there?"

"Radu wouldn't look for him in his own headquarters, would he?" Nick countered.

"The Raven," Max said slowly. The wounds on his face where already coming together. "The Enforcers where going to the Raven, they wanted to kill Radu's people."

"If Doyle's there, he'll be killed," Bodie gasped.

Max sat up and Bodie tried to make him lie back down, but Max shook him off. "If your going to try and rescue Vachon and Ray, I'll have to come with you."

"Give me one good reason why," Bodie demanded.

"As king of the vampires, I'm the only one allowed to call off the enforcers," Max reminded him. "I've done it all ready for Miklos."

"Why Miklos?" Nick asked.

"He's working for Radu."

"He's my spy, he's only working with Radu under my orders."

"Then we better get to the Raven."

* * *

Ray could hear the screaming of the victims of the enforcers. He hadn't been afraid many times in his life, but he was terrified now. He sat on the cot, wearing clothes Miklos had given him. The gray eyed man seemed upset at Doyle, even though this was the first time they had met. Vachon sat beside Doyle on the cot, his face was pale from the fear that he radiated. If vampires of his age where this terrified, he knew that these enforcers must be as powerful as his father taught him when he was a child. There was no hope of survival.

Vachon seemed to sense Doyle's thoughts as he put his arm around Ray's shoulders and drew him close to him and whispered in his ear. "I'll die before I let anyone hurt you, do you believe me?"

"If the enforcers find us, we'll all die," Miklos said grimly.

"Perhaps they won't find us," Vachon moved even closer to Doyle until he could feel the vampire's silky-like breath on his neck. "The enforcers aren't all powerful."

"They are, that's why they were formed," Miklos countered as he looked down to Doyle, "What will the king say when he finds out that you've been with other men?"

"The king?" Doyle asked innocently.

"His Majesty, Zandor Bodanskya Dracula, your lover." Miklos sneered.

*He means Bodie.* Vachon whispered in his mind.

"Bodie is the one that broke up with me, he has no claim over me."

"I didn't know that," Miklos sat down, the anger draining from him. "If you ever get back with Bodie, don't ever betray him with another vampire. "

He was with others when we where together."

"*Humans*, he had to feed, Ray, that's why he was involved with them, but if you are together, he will be loyal to you and will not take another vampire's blood."

"I know you were with him, so why did the two of you break up?"

"I betrayed him,' Miklos said. "When he needed me, I fled. I was terrified and all I thought of was myself, my survival. If I had helped, perhaps he could have saved his people. In a way, I caused their deaths and he will never forgive me for that betrayal, I've never forgiven myself."

"What will you do if we survive the enforcers?" Ray asked.

"I'm tired of this place. Since Janette's been gone, it hasn't been the same," Miklos sighed. "I think I'll go home to Moldova, now that it's free. I need not worry about arrests and it will be nice to feel the comfort of my home soil. What will you do Vachon?"

"I'll stick around here, I have someone I care about living here," Vachon said.

The noise from the outside came nearer and it sounded as if the enforcers where tearing apart the building to find every vampire or werewolf. Moments passed and then they entered their sanctuary. As they wrecked the room, Vachon's grip on Doyle few stronger until Doyle felt as if his shoulders would crush.

Suddenly the door to the hiding place was torn off and three enforcers stood in the doorway with their fangs bared, they all held stakes. The first grabbed Miklos and pulled him off the couch and into the main room. He shoved him against the wall and moved as if he was going to push the wooden spike through him.

The second turned to the first. "Not him!"

"Why not?" The first snarled.

"The king has ordered that his life be spared."

The first let go of Miklos, "Get out of here!"

"I will not leave without Vachon and Ray Doyle."

"They must be killed,' The third said. "Justice must be done."

"We are in hiding from Radu's people,' Vachon said.

"Your argument has no merit."

The second vampire took Doyle, the third Vachon and it took all the enforcers' strength to tear them apart. Then as Doyle was shoved against the wall, the enforcer looked him in the eye, trying to hypnotize him.

"How many more has Radu brought across?"

"I wasn't brought across by Radu!"

The second enforcer pushed Doyle to the ground into a crouched position, his face against the cold floor and he could hear the first enforcer unsheathe his sword.

Ray Doyle knew that one day he would die, he never in his life expected it would be by be-heading.

There was a fierce cry and the first Enforcer was tackled by Bodie. The second was pushed against the wall by Nick. And as the third Enforcer placed a stake against Vachon's chest, Max came into the room.

The king of the vampires looked as if he had been through some kind of attack, there was a bright red scar running across his face.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Your Highness, this man is a criminal," The third Enforcer said.

"I ordered you not to kill him," Max said firmly.

"Justice must be served," the Enforcer growled.

"It will not be served by you disobeying my orders."

"These men are code breakers."

"Enough, you have my orders and you will obey them," Max cut off.

When the third Enforcer held his ground, Max grabbed him by the neck and pulled him off of Vachon. He threw the Enforcer against one wall, who then tried to run but was captured by the king. Bodie tossed him a sword and with one swift movement, the vampire beheaded the Enforcer. As the body fell, Max looked up to the other Enforcers.

"I hope that the two of you have learned from this example that no one defies Vlad Dracula. I command you to give Javier Vachon and Ray Doyle safe passage. I further command you to make sure that you clean up the Raven, making sure there is no evidence of what you have done."

"Yes, Your Majesty," The two Enforcers left the room.

"Can I ask you something?" Nick asked.

"Ask," Max said.

"What happened to LaCroix? Did Radu kill him?"

"I don't know," Max admitted.

Ray got off the floor, he couldn't believe his luck in being rescued. "Thank you for saving our lives."

Bodie turned to Ray, a look of horror crossed his face. "You're a vampire!"

"Yes, Bodie, I am."

Bodie flew across the room and pinned Miklos against the wall and then growled, his canines showing. "You crossed Ray over!"

"Leave him alone, Bodie," Doyle said. "He didn't do anything to me!"

Bodie didn't let go of Miklos. "Don't lie for him, I know what he did, he hates me enough to cross you over!"

"Let go of Miklos," Max commanded and when Bodie didn't move, he touched his brother on the shoulder. "Don't blame Miklos for something he didn't do."

"Then who crossed Doyle over?"

"I was the first one to give him the blood."

"But he didn't get a second feeding," It finally dawned on Bodie. "How did he survive Blood fever?"

"Vachon helped me," Doyle said.

Bodie let go of Miklos and turned to Vachon and Max. "Why would you help him?"

"I helped him because you've had almost twenty years to bring him over, and you never did...why?" Max asked and when his brother didn't answer, he said. "You can consider it an order Bodanskya."

There was pain in Bodie's eyes. "Doyle betrayed me, the same way Miklos did and I'm beginning to think all of my lovers always will."

"You were never betrayed by Ray," Miklos said. "I was a coward Bodie, I will admit that. If you want to hate me forever fine, but don't judge Ray for something I did."

"You're lucky," Max said. "That you have a friend as loyal as Doyle, a friend that worked to clear your name."

"Did he tell you that?" Bodie countered.

"I made him tell me,"

"I remember our relationship, Bodie," Doyle said, he was trying hard to keep the anger that he felt at bay. "You chose to walk out of my life instead of staying around to hear my side of the story."

"You followed me, spied on me," Bodie said. "What else should I have thought?"

"We were lovers, you should have trusted me enough to ask me what I had done, instead you leapt to conclusions." Doyle's anger washed over him like a flood, he had always had a quick temper, but now, he felt justified in being angry. "*You* where the one who betrayed me, not the other way 'round!"

"We both made mistakes," Bodie admitted. "We should talk-in private."

"There's nothing to talk about," Doyle snapped. "When I get back to London, I am going to resign from CI5."

With that, Doyle left. He was surprised to see that the Enforcers gave him a wide berth. Stepping outside into the cool night air, he looked up, felt like flying, and for the first time in his life, he did.

* * *

Bodie had searched for Doyle for most of the night and he was beginning to think he would never find him. He realized that Ray Doyle was gone for good. Not that he blamed him, his hypnotizing Doyle into forgetting their affair probably did seem like a betrayal. If only he could tell him why he had done it.

*Damn Max!* Bodie thought. *Why did you have to make Ray remember, it was better the other way. Better , that is, then having the man you love hate you for all eternity....*

A sixth sense told Bodie that he should try to look for Doyle at Nick's loft. There he found Ray outside, standing on the balcony and looking up to the night sky. His once gray hair was now golden red, the curls, tighter and longer. He looked even younger then he did the first time they had met.

"What do you want?" Doyle asked, there was a harsh edge to his voice.

"I simply want to talk....."

"There's nothing to talk about," The younger vampire cut him off.

"Why do you hate me so much?"

"Perhaps it is because you hypnotized me into forgetting our marriage." Doyle spat. "Perhaps it was because you refused to listen to me when I said that I didn't try to set you up...perhaps it was because you never trusted me."

"I did trust you."

"Bullshit," Doyle turned to Bodie, his emerald eyes where filled with hate. He punched him, hard in the mouth and the older vampire fell to the ground, his lip bleeding. He didn't get up, didn't fight back, he knew fighting wouldn't help anything. His former lover looked down at him. "All you cared about was yourself."

"Then what do you call screwing around with my brother and Vachon?"

"When Max brought me over, I thought it was you," Ray said softly.

"What do you mean?"

"He hypnotized me, all I could remember was us making love. You apologized to me, then we made love, it was wonderful," The younger man paused. "When you offered me your blood, I couldn't refuse and when I awoke in the morning, Max was there. I felt as if I had cheated on you."

*You did,* Bodie thought. *Why does it hurt so much? I love you Ray, I'll always love you.*

Bodie felt Ray's arms go around his waist and panic swirled around him. He wanted to pull away but couldn't.....*Damn, how could the kid get so good at this so quickly?*

"You big lug, I love you, too," Doyle told him.

"You could read my thoughts?" Bodie gasped.

"The gift comes to everyone in different ways," The new vampire's arms tightened. "Why didn't you tell me you loved me?"

"I was afraid."

"You afraid? You're not afraid of anything."

"I was terrified, really terrified," he admitted. "I lost everything in the war and I was afraid that I would loose you, too."

"Then why did you set me free?"

"Because I was afraid."

"You'll never lose me, not now."

Bodie turned to Doyle, his sapphire eyes a sea of confusion. Ray answered by kissing him intensely and the older vampire began to cry. As Doyle's canines grew, Bodie could feel the terror emanating from the younger man, Ray tried to pull away from him, but Bodie's iron grip held him.

*It's all right, it's the way our kind make love,* Bodie telepathed to Ray.

Bodie brought his lips to Doyle's neck and slowly ran his lips up and down his lover's jugular.

The younger man gasped. *I've never felt anything this erotic.*

Bodie bit, drinking from him and letting his lover's emotions wash over him. Doyle grabbed his head and pulled him closer. It felt good to Bodie after all this time to taste Ray again. It was intense, very intense and he knew there was one last thing he could do to make this feeling even more erotic. He put his hand on Doyle's head and eased it to his own neck.

Doyle bit down and he could feel a surge from Ray as the younger vampire felt Bodie's emotions.

"That isn't true."

"Tell me, *Bodanskya*, after the Nazi's killed your people, how could you love one of them?"

"Marika was Jewish," Bodie said, bringing up a painful memory. "She spent most of the war in Auschwitz."

"Why wasn't she gassed?"

"Marika was part of Mengle's twin study, her and her brother were two of the few that I was able to get out before it was too late," the vampire paused. "How did you know about the Nazi's?"

"I overheard Vachon and Miklos talking one night. Why didn't you ever tell me what happened during the war?"

"It's not a part of my life that I like to re-live," Bodie got to his feet. "If you ever lost as much as I did, you would understand."

"There is something I never told you," The anger drained from Ray's face. "My father was an inherited vampire."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I thought you would think less of me if you knew I was a failed inherited."

"You're not a failure."

"Not now, but...why didn't you ever cross me over?"

"I was going to, until I thought you had betrayed me."

"I would never betray you"

"I know, now," Bodie said and realized that it was wrong for him to come here, it would have been better if Ray had disappeared into the night sky. "You won't have to worry about me any more."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to leave, it was time for me to move on, anyway."

"You're taking the easy way out, you mean."

"Starting over is never easy, but you're right, I should have never hypnotized you."

"Instead you betrayed me," The harsh edge to Doyle's voice returned.

"What about you?" Bodie walked away from Doyle to the edge of the balcony and stared out at the city.

"I didn't betray you."

Suddenly Doyle passed out.

Bodie pulled back and kissed his partner gently on the lips. He should have warned Ray that this could happen the first few times they made love. He picked the red headed man up in his arms and carried him to the bedroom.

* * *

**Three weeks later**

It was mid-morning when Natalie Lambert arrived back in Toronto. She felt a bit of regret that she had told Nick she couldn't get an earlier flight home. She was very surprised when he didn't sound too concerned though. She tried to put the thought out of her mind during the flight and Tracey seemed to talk continuously about the fun she had in London...and the man she had dated, Murphy.

*Lucky thing. All I could do during this trip was think of Nick and how I will never be able to have him.*

After going through customs and not finding a porter in sight, she piled her bags on the mini-cart that she had brought with her and walked to the entrance way, pulling the bags behind her. Perhaps there would be a taxi free. She found one and went home. She then took the elevator to her apartment.

"Hello beautiful," someone said. Coming up behind her, he slipped his arms around her waist and she knew it was Nick.

"Nick!" Nat let go of her baggage cart and turned in his arms. She looked up into his face which miraculously was free of burns and she looked at the window that was down the hallway from them, it spilled in sunlight. "How can you be out, it's daylight?"

"Yes, I know," Nick smiled.

"You burn up in the sun!"

"Not anymore. A old friend gave me a gift, a very special gift."

Nat tried to hide the hope that welled up in her. "Does this mean that your not a vampire anymore?"

"I'm still a vampire, but I'm a new kind."

She didn't understand, "What do you mean Nick?"

"I'm now an inherited."

"An inherited.....?"

"I can go out during the day, eat normal food," His smile grew wider. "I can even father children."

"Are you still a vampire?"

"Yes, I am."

"I think we better go inside," Nat pulled away from Nick and unlocked her door. She went inside. Nick followed her, pulling her luggage. She locked the door behind him.

"There is no cure for vampirism, but this is the next best thing," Nick was bubbling over with enthusiasm.

"How? A vampire's a vampire," She tried to sound disinterested as she put her handbag on the coffee table.

Nick went to her side and put his arm back around her waist. . "We can be together now."

She pulled away from him coldly. "You'll kill me!"

"I don't have to feed on my lovers anymore. It is a gift of the inherited. I won't go through blood lust when I am with you. If I do take your blood, I don't have to kill you or bring you across." He seemed to sense her mood and looked as if his world had collapsed on him. "I thought you would be happy, but I can see I was...wrong. I'll leave now."

Nick turned and walked to the door, but when he put his hand on the knob, Nat realized that if he walked out now, she would never see him again.

"Wait Nick," Nick stopped, but he didn't turn around.

"You have to admit, this is a lot to take in."

"It was for me at first, too," he admitted.

"You once told me about LaCroix's promise to you, that he would kill any lover you had."

"I am no longer a secondary," Nick said to the door. "LaCroix is no longer my master,"

"He could still kill me," She reminded him.

"Something happened while you where gone, LaCroix disappeared, he might even be dead."

"If he isn't dead, he'll come for me,"

"There have been orders given out by the king of the vampires that you are not to be harmed in any way."

Nat couldn't believe her ears. "There is a king of the vampire?"

"Yes, there is."

"And you know him, is he evil?"

"No, defiantly not. You know him, too, Max Shreck."

That hit Nat like a thunder bolt, she did knew Max. "Max is a vampire? He has a family, he can eat normal foods and go out during the day."

"He's an inherited."

"Did he make you like him?"

"No, his brother did."

Nat still couldn't be sure. "Will LaCroix do as Max orders?"

"LaCroix will be destroyed, if he doesn't," Nick took a deep breath. "I've wanted to be with you since the first time we met. Now we have the chance, please let us take it."

In answer, Nat went up to him and touched his chin, gently turning it so that he was facing her.

"I'm willing to take the chance, Nick,"

With that he kissed her, giving her the passion that he had long repressed and as he had promised, his fangs didn't grow. With one swift motion, he picked her up and carried her into the bedroom.

* * *

Doyle woke, he realized that he was lying in bed, but had no memory of how he had gotten there. Even before he opened his eyes, though, he could feel Bodie's presence beside him. He knew it was Bodie, somehow he could feel it.

He opened his eyes. The room wasn't dark, even though there were no lights on, but it was bathed in a twilight-like glow. Bodie was lying on his side, his head propped up on his elbow.

He was simply watching him.

Now that Ray was a vampire, he could see a deeper blue in Bodie's eyes that almost made them black. "Can I ask a stupid question?" he finally asked.

"There are no stupid questions," Bodie's tone of voice was one Doyle had never heard before, it was beyond gentle, beyond loving.

"How did I get here?"

"I carried you."

"The last thing I remember....." Even thinking of it brought back a flood of memories.

"You remember biting me," Bodie ran his finger down Ray's cheek, even that felt natural.

"Yes, I remember that, then I woke up here."

"I should have warned you about that," Bodie smiled a bit. "The first few sharings of blood will be quite intense, it might make you pass out."

"When will they stop being so intense?"

"Never, you just get use to them."

Doyle then asked a question that had been nagging at him for quite a while. "Max and Vachon crossed me over, does that mean that they'll be my master?"

"Does that bother you?"

"My father use to tell me about a vampire's master, that you had to follow them. If he commands you to do something, you had to do it."

Bodie started to play with the younger vampire's curls. "If it will put your mind to ease, only secondary vampires have masters."

"I'm a secondary, I didn't cross over when I was a teen-ager."

"No, my love, you're not."

*Bodie called me his love, why does that seem so natural?* Doyle thought, *Why do I feel as if I will always have a place at his side.*

"You're still an inherited," Bodie told him. "Didn't your father ever tell you any of this?"

"I don't understand."

"You're mother was human and as it is always with an inherited/human union, twins are born," the older vampire explained. "One twin becomes an inherited and becomes a vampire when he is a teen-ager, the other, after he dies."

"What about Vachon? He gave me his blood so that I could be able to cross over and he is a secondary."

"He told me that he will make no claim over you."

"How do you know he was telling the truth?"

"I've known Vachon for two hundred and fifty years, in all that time, he has never lied to me."

"You said a twin that didn't cross over would become a vampire when they died, does that mean that Max killed me?"

"In a way, yes he did." Bodie said. "Does that bother you?"

Doyle thought for a moment, as Bodie continued to play with his curls. "Somehow it doesn't."

"You should have told me about your father before."

"What would have been the point?"

"It would have changed our relationship," Bodie's smile grew wider. "I might have killed you myself."

"I wouldn't have forgiven you, if you did that,' Doyle teased. "I can see the headline in the Sun now 'Man bedded vampire that killed him'"

His lover's eyes looked confused. "Does that mean you want to stay in my bed?"

"For as long as you will have me," Ray vowed.

The older vampire kissed Doyle and it was a gentle kiss without passion, only love. "I was beginning to believe you would never tell me that."

"It's the truth," Doyle paused. "How are we going to be able to explain my new facelift to the people at CI5?"

"You might not have to."

"What do you mean?"

"It's time for us to move on," the older vampire said simply.

"We can't do that, can we?"

"I talked to Cowley before you awakened, he suggested that we transfer to the Toronto police department."

"When they look at my records, they'll know something is up,' Doyle reminded him. "Besides, there are too many people here that know me."

"That's easily explained, your Ray Doyle's younger brother."

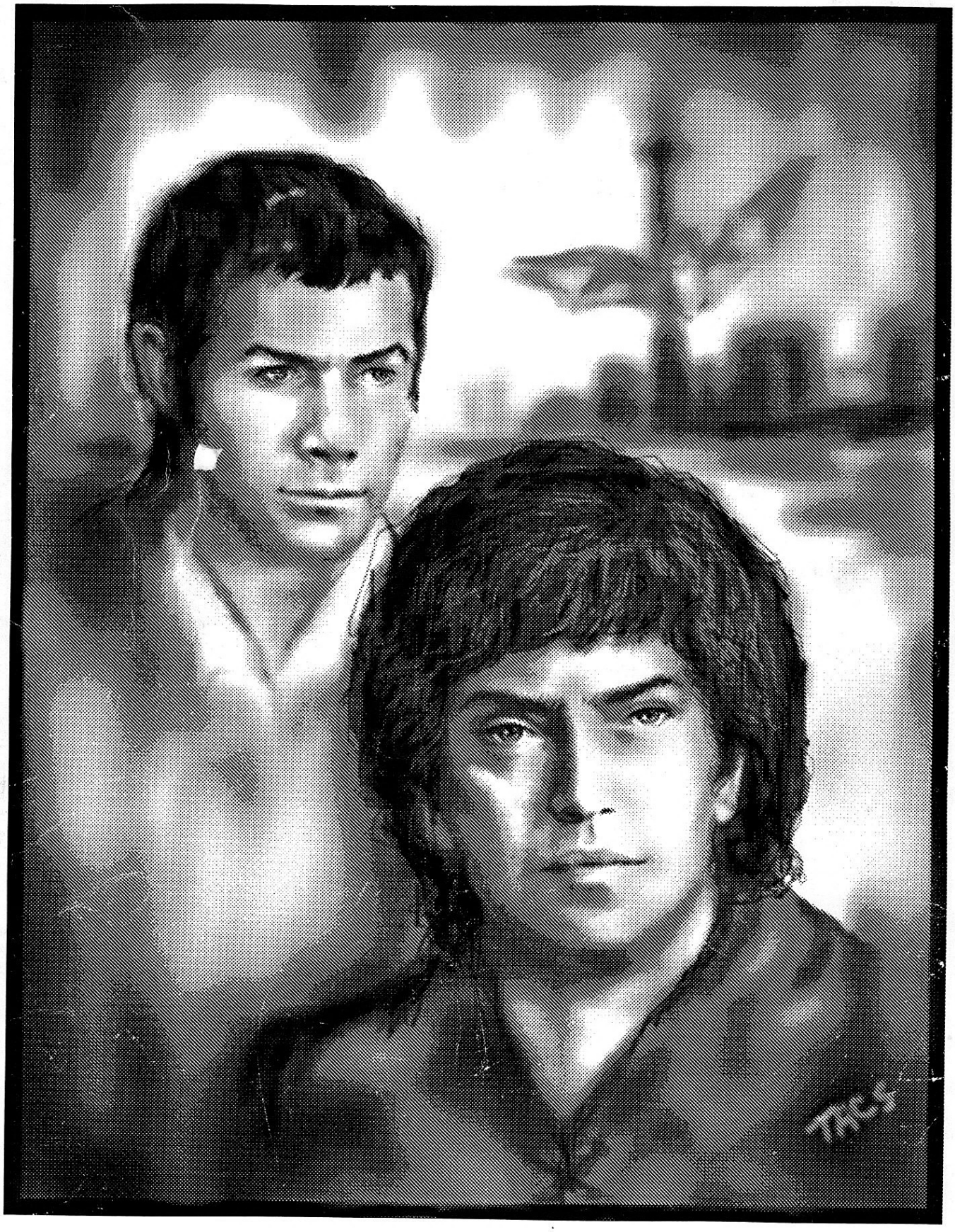
"We can't prove that."

"There's this inherited I know, named Merlin..."

"Merlin, not *the* Merlin!" Doyle gasped.

"Yes, *the* Merlin, he's a wiz at records and he's going to change all the dates on our records and convince the computers at police H.Q. to authorize the transfer. With his help, we should have no trouble setting up our new life," Bodie paused. "That is if you want that. I won't force you, Ray."

Ray Doyle smiled at his lover.

"You're not forcing me...ever!"

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